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A NOVEL

THE HONEY HARLOT
CHRISTIANNA
BRAND



The Honey Harlot

A Novel

Christianna Brand

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To John Ball who, with darling Pat, made his home in California a second home to me. In gratitude for many kindnesses, from 'Chris-for-Love.'

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This novel is based upon the true mystery of the fate of the Mary Celeste, found abandoned in 1872, under circumstances never explained. All the facts of the mystery here given are correct. The names and details of the characters are for the most part correct, but it must be said that what I report as said and done is all a fictional suggestion to explain away the mystery; and nothing has ever emerged to show that Captain Benjamin Briggs or any of his crew were less than good and honest people.

CHAPTER I

I AM VERY OLD now—very old. Is it sixty years or nearer seventy that I have been immured in this place?—behind these high white walls, doing penance for his sins—for my husband's sins and for hers also whom they called Honey Mary, but for whom the Honey Tigress might have been a better name. The Tigress of the Sea...

And the white walls dissolve and I am standing again on the foredeck of the brigantine Amazon—a young girl as I was then, bride of a few weeks—looking down on the dirt and darkness of the swarming wharves of the New York waterfront and seeing their shadows lit, like the sombre hues of a Rembrandt picture, by a sudden gleam of gold.

The gleam of her hair: that hair that was the colour of dark honey straight from the hive, a great rolling, curling mass of it, brushing her creamy white shoulders, framing her bold, beautiful face as she strolled, so sunnily sweet and smiling, among the great throng of sailors there—offering gold for gold.

And my husband, Benjamin Briggs, captain of this ship, the Amazon: a God-fearing man.

Some fool is giving a lecture to the convent school-children on the so-called mystery of the 'Marie Celeste' as he keeps calling her. The most famous maritime mystery of all time. So they've brought me down to listen (*me*—to listen to the story of the Mary Celeste!)—Reverend Mother thinks it will be a little treat for me; they are full of little treats, these days, it seems that I am celebrating some jubilee or other,

something, I really don't know what. Or rather *they* are celebrating it; there's not been much for me to celebrate, locked away here for all this long time, among these bright, dark, narrow-minded women in this bright, dark, narrowly walled-in place. So, shrugging, hunched in my wheelchair, pretending indifference, I have let them bring me down. It will interest me, Reverend Mother feels sure: I shall be the only one present who may remember something of the time when it all happened—perhaps even heard echoes of the extraordinary events of those long-ago days? Eighteen seventy-two.

Eighteen seventy-two—the very year I immured myself within these walls. Did it never enter anyone's head that I, discovered drifting, near to death, in that battered rowing boat not so very, very far away from where the abandoned ship had been found, might be in some way connected with the mystery? But no. I was brought ashore up here in northern Portugal, and the brig was eventually sailed into Gibraltar harbour where the enquiry was held. Communications no doubt were hardly expeditious in these wild parts all those many years ago, and wrecks were frequent enough and so were survivors in open boats. Nothing remained, I dare say, after all her sufferings in wind and weather, of the name on the stern of the yawl; and such letters as may have been discernible will have been the letters of the old name, Amazon, not of the new. Only one letter, the 'a' common to the two names. Did this cross then, which now dangles at the end of my rosary with her name engraved upon it, suggest nothing to them? But again, no—why should it?—the Captain's wife was known to have been aboard but her name was Sarah Briggs; and what would the name Mary Sellers mean to those ignorant of her very existence—when they insist to this day upon

referring to the abandoned brig as the *Marie Celeste*?

And the *Marie Celeste* the lecturer calls her, droning on. But the rest is true enough, of course—is history. Two-masted, square rigged, (about a hundred foot long, she would be, twenty-five foot wide, if you would visualise her). Carrying a crew of seven with the Captain and his wife. Bound for Genoa from New York with a cargo of crude alcohol. Found drifting 4 December 1872, a derelict, between the islands of the Azores and Portugal. Latitude 38° says the man (if that means anything to you, for certainly it doesn't to me), longitude 17°. With not a living soul aboard her.

Floating, all sails set. No living creature to be seen. A few papers and the chronometer gone, the log still remaining but not written up for the past ten days. Money and possessions lying all about as though she were still inhabited, clothes, women's trinkets, pipes and tobacco, papers, charts, books. Food in the galley as though still in use; a letter started on a slate as though to be fair copied later, 'Fanny, my dear wife—' In the captain's cabin beneath the double bunk, a sword or cutlass in its scabbard, stained with what might be blood; over the bunk his pocket-watch hanging from its hook. The mark of a hatchet or cleaver, driven into a wooden deck rail. A lanyard cut or torn down—a length of thick rope, that would be; but no sign of any use it might have been put to. The one boat the brig carried, the ship's yawl, missing, but with nothing to suggest her launching; the davits where the longboat would have hung, showed still that no boat had hung there, and indeed it was known to have been left ashore at New York. Only the yawl, then; and, with a perfectly sound vessel beneath him, suggests the lecturer, who would dare crowd nine souls aboard one rowing boat with a single small sail and launch

them upon the winter Atlantic, eight hundred miles from land? (Even less ten souls, my dear sir! Even less ten!)

And a few feet above the waterline, two long scars across the bows as though from collision with another vessel. But in the cabin a sewing-machine all ready for working; and perched on a narrow shelf above the machine, a small oil can and a cotton reel that must certainly have been dislodged by any considerable jar, let alone a collision between ships. ‘And those are the facts, my dear girls and boys—*meus meninos e meninas*—those are the facts about the mystery of the Marie Celeste which have never been explained to this day

Yes, the facts. Much that would not fit in with the story, neatly explained away—the cotton reel had rolled to the floor and one or other of those first to board the ship had picked it up automatically and in the excitement forgotten the tiny incident; the food exposed in the galley not really there, an exaggeration of detail built in to make the story more exciting; the stained cutlass merely rusty. But the rest admitted to be true: to be history. A ship abandoned under full sail, drifting uncontrolled and yet holding to a steady enough course, east, nor'east, for two hundred miles since she had been abandoned—judging by the last date when the log was made up. Not a living soul aboard, but without the smallest sign of any preparation for departure; clothes, money, valuables all left as they lay. A cask of alcohol broached—crude alcohol, unfit in this form for human consumption and very little of it gone. A cutlass lying under the captain's bed stained with what might or might not be blood, a hatchet mark cloven into the wooden deck rail. Scars across the bows of a collision which had caused no jar sufficient to dislodge a reel of cotton. No boat missing but a cockle-shell, impossible of accommodating in

any safety the ship's complement of eight men and one woman, on the stormy waters, shark infested, of the bitter cold Atlantic, eight hundred miles from land. And no sign ever again of a crew of seven or of the Captain or his wife, nor of any spar or fragment of the ship's yawl. Of all the great sea mysteries—to this day the greatest and most inexplicable...

The lecturer mumbles off into the old tally of possible solutions, every one long dismissed as untenable. Invasion by pirates, sailing off with the prisoners as well as the—nonexistent—booty; but except for the hatchet mark, no sign of any fight or struggle aboard ship and the cutlass stowed safely away. Captain Briggs and the crew, party to some plot involving insurance of the ship?—but the whole world of sail knew that Benjamin Briggs was a man incapable of such an act of dishonesty, and of his crew of supposed accomplices, let alone his wife, no sign was ever heard of again—impossible for eight men, familiar about the narrow world of trading ships, to vanish without trace; impossible that, rich in ill-gotten gains, much given to women and drink, they could have kept such a secret close to the end of their days. A vast octopus, then, reaching up its tentacles to curl them about every soul aboard and suck them all down into the sea? An outbreak of Yellow Fever aboard? Or a threatened explosion among the casks of alcohol? But the trading captains were well experienced in the care of such cargoes; and what threat could be sufficient to drive them all into that tiny boat, single-sailed, on the cold, heaving, storm-tossed bosom of the limitless ocean...?

And so on and so on. I am sickened by their nonsense, I sign to two of the younger nuns—I am grown imperious in my old age and none cares to gainsay me—to be wheeled away and up to my white-walled cell and so to the prie-Dieu

beneath the heavy crucifix; and, kneeling, pray as I have prayed every hour I think, of the thousands of hours of my self-imposed incarceration here: *Christ have mercy upon him, Christ forgive him the weaknesses of the flesh! And Christ forgive her also!*—who was golden and beautiful and in her wicked, wanton ways strangely—innocent. *Father, forgive her! Father, forgive him!*—for it is true to say I think that he knew not what he did: that in his heart and in his soul, my husband, Benjamin Briggs, was a God-fearing man. *Hail Mary, full of grace...*

At the end of my rosary dangles the golden cross, engraved with her name.

Her name also was Mary. Mary Sellers. And the name of my husband's brig was the Mary—not the Marie—Celeste.

It was the nearest he had dared to come, to naming his ship after her.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS THE GOLD cross that attracted me when I saw her first, gleaming at her creamy white throat as the honey hair gleamed all about her white shoulders; which now, however, were wrapped in an old black shawl, held huddled about her. She sat crouched against a tall pillar down there on the dockside and she was weeping. I watched from the deck of the Amazon as now and again a man stopped and spoke to her, bending over her, concerned; and she shook her bright head and spoke a word and the men moved sharply away. Up here on deck, all was clean and shining; the ship was new-fashioned, recently much rebuilt, a top deck above the old single deck, a few feet added to her length, a great deal to her tonnage. My husband, the new captain and part-owner, was delighted with her, she was so slender and pretty with all the sheen still upon her of her spruce and pine above, and strong, clean beech and birch and maple below. But down on the waterline, the wharves were cluttered and foul, great bales of straw, infested with rats the size of cats, their red eyes glittering; crates and barrels and boxes, the tall cranes stooping their rigid necks to pick up and swing aloft the knotted rope nets into which the ships' cargoes were bundled, and lower them with a screeching scrape of unoiled machinery, into the holds. It was early November, very chill and yet, fascinated, I continued there, wrapped in my shawl, watching the pushing, thrusting, cursing, laughing mob that swarmed below, jostling in good humour, or in ill-temper flaring into fisticuffs. The sailors, flat-capped, in their rough navy jerseys or heavy serge jackets, shouldering their way

through the crowds with their canvas bags slung over their shoulders—back from a long voyage perhaps and hungry for a woman's comforting, as I know now: I was ignorant and innocent then—or setting forth and as hungry again for what they would not know for weeks, even months, to come. I watched with fascinated horror the brassy women moving among them, speaking to them boldly, accosting them, putting up a hand to stroke a shaven cheek or tug with importunate familiarity at a growth of beard. Only among them all crouched the still figure wrapped in the black shawl, shrugging away all those who approached her: weeping. Oh, God!—that I had never seen her weeping there, weeping, weeping, with her bright hair and the gleam of the golden cross!

I was very young: totally inexperienced, had never been more than twenty miles, I daresay, from my small-town home in Marion, Massachusetts, where my father was pastor. I understood nothing of men and women until my husband—also from Marion, and in fact my first cousin—married me and brought me down to New York where his new ship, the recently fitted *Amazon*, awaited him, picking up her first cargo at the East River docks. I looked down at the weeping woman and knew nothing of her but for some plight which I could not guess at. I said to one of the crew, 'Do you know anything of that poor woman? Why do you think she's crying so?'

Andrew Gilling it was, the second mate, a big, burly, bearded man, rough and crude, a bullying man. He said: 'Why don't you go down and find out?'

I looked with dismay at the filthy cobbled waterside, with its rats and its crowds and its hustle and bustle of men and those terrible women. It was early November, a time when in these parts, they say, there often comes a sort of

second summer, a week or two of sunshine, the weather cold but clear. Now the sun slanted down, its rays lit up the huddled, dark figure abandoned to its grief. My husband had warned me—as though it were necessary—never to leave the ship. But... *She*, after all, was down there alone. I stood, hesitant, confused, bewildered, at a loss what to do: and at that moment she lifted her beautiful, tear-stained face and looked up at me.

Without further thought, I leaned over the rail and beckoned her to come aboard.

I had thought that Gilling might go forward to meet her but he had disappeared, fading into the background without another word. She rose, looked up again at me as though to question that I really invited her; then slowly moving, so tall and stately, wrapped in the black shawl with her honey hair shining, she passed through the jostling throng and came up the companionway steps to where I stood awaiting her on the deck. And it seemed to me—and well may have been the case, as it later proved—that the hustle on the wharf-side was for a moment stilled, that a hundred faces were lifted, curious, incredulous, and as I now know—amused. I put out my hand to her and she stepped on to the deck of the brigantine *Amazon*; and so into my life, and his.

I said to her, holding her hand: ‘Can I help you in some way? You look so sad.’

She looked back at me with her great eyes, the colour of amber, drowned in tears. ‘I am wrong to come to you,’ she said.

‘If you’re unhappy—?’ I held her hand still and led her into my cabin in the stern of the ship. There was water there in a carafe and I poured out a glass for her—my husband, though he carried so incongruous a cargo, would permit no liquor aboard his ship. She drank as it seemed

gratefully, sinking down into the chair I offered her and throwing back the black shawl. And so for the first time I saw her in all her beauty.

She was magnificent: tall, exquisitely slender and yet with a full bosom, her shoulders brushed by the tumbling curls of heavy golden hair. Her waist was small, her hips spreading out beneath but only into a fullness, a roundness which left her slender still: she was a creature all curves, not an angle about her, never a movement without its matchless grace. Yet her gestures were quick and expressive, there was no heavy slowness about her, she was all life and movement and as she spoke she used her hands to illustrate every point. Her voice was low and vibrant and even when she raised it, it had in it a sort of sweetness. She was all sweetness—Honey Mary; and even I whose long life has been through her something close to hell, must ever concede that for all her monstrous wickedness there was something in her, deeply and essentially, true to her name.

I waited in silence while she drank the water, put down the empty glass. I would not press her confidence. She also was silent, drying her eyes, pushing back the damp curls from her forehead, settling the neck of her dark dress where the golden cross hung gleaming. She touched the cross with her fingers when at last she spoke to me. She said: 'I shouldn't be here. I'm in great distress, it's true, but I shouldn't be here, not with such as you.' And she raised the great tear-filled eyes to me. She said: 'I'm a bad woman. I daresay you don't even know that such women as I exist.'

I was a little frightened but I said: 'I don't think anyone so beautiful as you can be bad.'

She made no foolish denials of the compliment implied. She said: 'It's *because* I'm beautiful.'

Where she was slender and rounded I was angular and

thin, where her eyes were the colour of amber, mine were brown and bright; my hair was pale auburn but its sheen was diminished to extinction by her honey-gold and where hers curled riotously down to her shoulders, mine was straight and must be brushed back into decorous bands about my head. And yet there were those who had thought me to have something of beauty. I said: 'I don't think that a woman's good looks need make her bad.'

'Then you don't know men,' she said.

Poor little bride of a few weeks; coming to an awareness of men, or at least of one man. 'I am a married woman,' I said, protesting.

'Your husband is the best, the most respected, the most splendid of men. His reputation goes before him like a pillar of fire. He's a righteous man, a man proud of his good name, preaching God to all sinners—invited into the pulpits, I've heard, to thunder out his warnings to us, the damned

'You mustn't!' I cried. 'You mustn't call yourself damned! You blaspheme.'

Her voice dropped. 'If you knew all,' she said, 'you would call me damned.'

'I know only that you're very unhappy,' I said.

Outside it was bitterly chill, the grey light beat down from the glassed-in skylight raised fifteen inches above deck level; but within a fire burned and the small cabin was snug and trim. I had entered it with pride, putting my girlish touches here and there, my basket of needles and threads and scissors and pins, my sewing machine. My husband's gift at our marriage had been a melodeon, very pretty in mahogany inlaid with other woods, and this was fitted in between the heavy chests, battened down to the floor, which held our personal possessions. Not that I was musical; he had hoped I should at least improve enough to entertain

him with the hymns he delighted in, for I had a pretty enough singing voice; but so far, little had been accomplished. There was something—stupid—about me; I was so slow to learn, to learn to play the piano or any of the other accomplishments a young woman was supposed to attain to, or even indeed to any degree of education or practicality. I know that there had been some astonishment when such a man as Captain Benjamin Briggs—sober, settled, famous as a lay preacher and twenty years my senior, had singled me out for marriage. None, I promise you, more astonished than I; though by gradual degrees I was by now beginning to find out the reason. Perhaps it was some vague reference to these discoveries that prompted me now to ask of my visitor why she should describe herself as 'bad'. She replied: 'I am a woman of the water-front.'

I didn't know, not really, what it meant. I stammered out: 'But isn't that—something terrible?'

'What have I been telling you?' she said.

'You...? I've seen women—go up to men... But not women like you. You, you're beautiful, you aren't dressed like they are, vulgar and—indecent, one can't bear to look at them. Your dress is what a dress should be, you wrap yourself in your shawl. And you wear this cross

'The cross was given to me by one I love,' she said. 'To teach me to repent.'

'Then if you repent—'

'I've repented too late,' she said. 'He's left me, he's gone. He sailed away on this morning's tide and left me alone with my sins. And my sins are my way of life; I have nothing, there's no other way for me. I repent and yet I must turn back to it. Now that he's gone, how else shall I live?'

I stared back at her, trembling, in absolute terror. I

knew nothing of the realities, I knew only recent experiences of my own which, all untaught as I was, had deeply shocked and frightened me. I was only now beginning to comprehend that such experiences might be exchanged not only between man and wife but between a man and many women, a woman and many men—and, horror of horrors, even as a way of life, as a means of earning one's bread. Up to now, when such vague knowledge had come to me through my observations of the life of the waterside of New York's harbour, I had shied away from it, blocked off my mind from it; my own uneasy gropings for comprehension of the ways of one man had troubled me enough, I needed to know no more. But now... 'There must be other ways to live. There must be work to do —'

'Who will employ me?' she said.

'Surely... So beautiful as you are—could you not marry —?'

'Who would marry me?' she said.

I was silent, defeated. She sat with her bright head bowed into her hands. She said only: 'Pray for me!'

'Oh, yes,' I said. 'I will pray.' And I knelt down before her, put my hands up, curving them round her own white hands and her buried face. 'We'll pray together,' I said.

And I prayed, prayed to God for her salvation, for hope for her, for help for her. She remained silent. When it was done she sat for a moment with bowed head; then she straightened herself, rose up, wound her shawl again about her shoulders and shook back her heavy hair. She said: 'What is your name?'

'My name is Sarah,' I said.

'Then Sarah,' she said, 'with all my heart I thank you. I shouldn't have come, I would never have come if I hadn't

been half blind, half mad, in my despair; I had no right to come. But thank you. And now I'll go.'

I stood before her, my hands held out to her, trembling.
'Where will you go?'

So lovely she looked, standing there; so lovely, so sweet and—so sad. 'Back to where I came from,' she said. 'There's nothing else for me,' and she bent forward and kissed my cheek and straightened again.

Oh, kiss of Judas! For she knew when she kissed me who stood in the doorway and watched her, she knew what would follow: it was for this that she had come.

My husband's voice thundered out: 'Sarah! For God's sake! What is this woman doing here?'

I think I never knew a silence more terrible: a silence that lasted so long. She had dropped off the shawl again, it slid back from her shoulders—who knows with what clever little shrug she dislodged its folds so that it should fall back and leave her standing there in all the magnificence of her beautiful body, in the dark dress, reaching up to her throat and down to her instep, yet so closely fitted and clung that I recognised suddenly that in his eyes she might have stood naked there. She lifted her head and looked back into his face. For a long time she looked back at him and he, whose great splendour of language could rise like a storm to threaten all the world of wickedness with a very deluge, stood speechless before her. I think I half fainted, moving aside, leaving them standing facing one another, those two; but at last it was I who spoke, faltering and yet not ashamed; terribly frightened of him, but yet not ashamed. I said: 'She's unhappy. She's lost the man she loves. I asked her to come, I wanted to comfort her.'

'The man she loves!' he said. 'She loves a thousand

men, only that she goes to them, not in the name of love. She's filth, she's vile she's the lowest scum of all this low waterside.'

She made a sort of forward little bowing movement, bending her head in unprotesting acquiescence. She said: 'To which I will now return.'

'Don't let her go!' I cried. 'She repents, she doesn't want to go, it's only that there's nothing else for her.'

'Nothing else?' he said, staring back into her pale face his own dark with indignation. 'Let her be like other women. Let her work.'

She lifted her head and gave him back look for look. 'Do you think I don't?' she said.

'You work!' he said. 'Is that work to you?—lying back in your sinful luxury, lying back against your soft pillows with that hair all spread out like a web of gold to trap men's souls and drag them down to that hell that you make heaven for them... Is that work to you?—to part your red lips to those foul kisses, to wind your white arms round the naked bodies of men unknown to you outside the narrow bed of your whoring, is that work to you...?' His words gushed forth now, his voice was raised to a pitch of something like fever, his face was white, dreadfully patched with red. He went on and on. My mind reeled, I stopped my ears against the filth of his accusations, the crudity of his expression, the horrible depths of his comprehension of the depravities of her trade. But she stood still and quiet and listened to him as though she were frozen in the icy hail of his wild impeachment; and when at last for very exhaustion, it seemed, he fell suddenly, abruptly silent, standing, head bowed, hands hanging at his sides, she said only, very quietly: 'Then—help me!'

He swayed where he stood, all the fury and fervour

gone. He mumbled: 'Help you?'

'Your voice is like a silver trumpet,' she said. 'No man has spoken to me with such words before.' And she made a little beseeching movement with those narrow white hands of hers and said again: 'Help me!'

He turned away from her. 'You are lost,' he said. 'None can help you but God. Turn to God. Pray to God. No other can help you.'

'I can't pray,' she said. She put out her hand to me where I stood sick and frightened. 'She tried to teach me—this sweet thing, so innocent and lovely in her innocence. But I've forgotten what it is to pray—as I've forgotten what it is to be innocent. *He* can't help me—my life has put God beyond my reach.'

'Your way of life was your own choice,' he said.

'Do you think so?' she said, sadly.

'Its future at any rate is your own choice,' he said.

She said again, sadly: 'Do you think so?'

He straightened himself, squared his shoulders. 'At any rate, it is nothing to do with me or mine. I shall not touch pitch. Get away from me. Your life is in your own hands.'

She put up her arms slowly with a movement all careless grace and lifted her heavy hair with the back of her wrists so that her two hands might meet behind her neck and unfasten the chain that held the golden cross. Then she slid the cross from its chain and with one of those flashes of movement, before he could draw back, had put it into his hand. 'Now my life's in my own hands no longer,' she said. 'I have put it into yours.' And while he stood bemused and I stricken almost into immobility, she had lifted the shawl once more around her shoulders and folding it about her, slipped out through the low door of the cabin and was gone.

He said not a word to me; just stood there staring down

at the little golden cross in the palm of his big hand. Then he turned at last and went out on to the deck. I followed him.

She had come to the foot of the gangway, a man put out a hand to help her step ashore. She took his hand but released herself immediately she was safe on the cobble stones, and moved away from him with a word of thanks—with, I thought, a light shake of the head. The dark shawl clutched about her, she returned to the pillar against which I had seen her crouched, weeping, and standing there, turned and looked back and up at the ship and then began to move off slowly, through the crowd. A man stopped her and spoke to her but she shook her head; a second spoke and was repulsed also, and a third—then she moved away out of our sight. My husband's two hands were clenched into fists on the wooden rail of the deck. When the last glimpse of her bright head was gone he said, in a low, sick voice: 'Pray for her,' and a moment later had gone about his work. I heard his voice raised in rough anger against some member of the crew, failing in his duty. I turned and went away out of the cold, back to the cabin.

That night he took my body with a violence that had something in it almost of savagery; but when I made some small responsive movement of my own, he bade me fiercely to lie still—did I think I was a whore?

The next day I watched from the deck and he now and again joined me and I knew that he, also, watched for her, both of us praying for her that she should not be there. But the day after that, she was there; she looked very pale and I thought to myself that when she had said that she did what she did for her bread, that might in actual truth be so. For this time she replied to the first man who spoke to her, and I saw the gesture of the lovely hand; you could almost read

that she said: 'I must have something to eat.' He laughed and dived into his bag and taking out his knife, cut off a chunk of some bread or meat or biscuit, I don't know what, which she took from him and ate voraciously. When it was done, he spoke to her again, earnestly; she seemed to plead a little, to protest perhaps; then, with drooping shoulders, not looking up to where, with my husband, I stood on the deck looking on—she went away through the crowd with him.

My husband put his hand into his pocket and took out the golden cross. He stood for a moment staring down at it; then he said to me: 'Should I go to save her?'

And God help me, I answered: 'Yes.'

CHAPTER III

I AM VERY OLD now—very old; but kneeling here before the crucifix, praying for his soul as, over so many years now I have knelt and prayed—it all comes back to me as clearly and brightly as though it were yesterday. And if sometimes I seem to invent what in fact I cannot know from my own actual experience, it is because I have for so long, so often imagined it, built it all up in my mind, that it comes to life and tells its own story as though indeed I *had* been there...

Was I there when Captain Morehouse of the *Dei Gratia* offered my husband that wager?—no, of course I was not. And yet—I see it, I hear the very words they spoke. Captain Morehouse was a big, bluff man with a heavy moustache and a heavy, rather frizzy beard dividing below his chin into two points; a handsome, cheery fellow whom all men would call a friend. Coming strolling up to my husband as he stood on the cobbled quayside, his hands in the pockets of his knee-length heavy cloth jacket with its brass buttons, looking up at his pretty new ship. A big man also, my husband, Captain Benjamin Briggs, with his fine, fierce face, dark hair, brushed back, worn long, just concealing his ears and the nape of his neck, thick dark moustache and short jutting black beard. ‘Well, Briggs—a very pretty little piece of work; a very pretty little craft.’

‘She is beautiful,’ my husband would have replied; that was always his word for the brig. ‘She’s beautiful.’

‘I remember her when she first appeared, ten years ago or more. Nova Scotia built. She had only the one deck then, a very trim little piece even in those days. But her history wasn’t good.’

‘She did well enough the first years, till she went ashore at Cape Breton, in the gale.’

‘But messed about a bit, since then. However, you’ve made a lovely piece of work of her now. Part owner, aren’t you?’

‘Eight twenty-fourths; over a thousand pounds I’ve got in her. Syndicate, all Americans now. Cap’n Spates brought her down from Cow Bay. He says she handled very well; I have high hopes of her.’

‘Well, God speed to her and all who sail in her; we’ll hope she’ll not play the Amazon with *you*.’

‘I mean to change the name,’ my husband will have said. ‘I don’t care for the word.’

Not care for the word—Amazon; which suggested a big, fine strapping woman; which suggested... Dear God, who knows? Who knows what red fires burned, unsuspected of all, beneath the damped down embers of that dark heart of his? He would turn the thought aside. ‘We sail in eight days’ time for Genoa.’

‘Why—I too, to Genoa, carrying petroleum. What’s your cargo?’

‘We carry crude alcohol. Six thousand pounds value.’

‘Crude alcohol! Well, that’s a fine one for such as you! For the Italians to fortify their wine.’ And Morehouse would burst out with his great Ho! Ho! of laughter. ‘A man of your pretensions—to carry alcohol!’

‘I carry what cargo is offered me. I’m part of a company, if the orders are to carry alcohol, that’s what I carry. Crude alcohol may have other uses than to make men drunk.’

‘Ay, well, and so you take comfort to your conscience.’

‘My conscience is clear, sir. No drop of spirits has ever passed these lips.’

‘You’re the poorer for it, Captain Briggs. A skinful of liquor, an armful of woman—what harm did they ever do a man, bound for the long, cold emptiness of a voyage half across the world from which, if the seas rise up in their wrath against him, he may never even come back? To go to your Maker, never having drunk a dram or whored with a wench—why, what did the Lord intend such comforts for?’

And the face would grow grey beneath its weather-beaten tan and the dark eyes stream fire and the whole tall, strong figure seem to tense to rigidity in its passion of evangelistic fury. ‘Man, you blaspheme! You insult the great God who made you, who made such poor creatures as, in your filth and debauchery, you defile and destroy. But beware, I warn you, beware...’ And he would thunder on and on, and launch at last into the final great peroration of all his thunderings. ‘I implore you, beware! Beware, before it’s too late, beware lest perhaps in this very hour, He grow weary of your obduracy and lift, at last, His great golden hand and sweep you, with all your sins upon you, off the face of this earth which you defile with your very presence on it; and so cast you into the outer darkness for unimaginable eternity

Not many men laughed on, in the presence of Captain Benjamin Briggs, when he spoke from this great rostrum of his fiery indignation in the name of God. For, with all his weaknesses, on account, perhaps of those very weaknesses, there burned within him a deep sincerity, believing as he did with all his being in a great, and a vengeful God, a God whose white blaze of purity it was sin and shame to offend against, and to himself a very agony to see defiled. Not many men laughed; but Captain Morehouse, he would laugh, he laughed at everything, God save his soul!—and he would laugh now and protest: ‘Well, well, you’ll never

convert me, Briggs, from a breasty wench and a bottle of rum; and I'll wager you the second, if not the first, for you've got a pretty woman of your own and a marriage bed to enjoy her in—that if you would but take a drop of it now and then, you'd be an easier fellow to live with, even to yourself.' And he would insist, 'Come, a wager! A bottle of whisky, that the *Dei Gratia* reaches landfall in Portugal before your pretty Amazon—and you'll drink it if I win!'

My husband never struck a man in his life—or had never struck a man until that day. But they say that he lifted his fist against David Morehouse then; and only at the last moment dropped his hand, turned and walked away.

And Captain Morehouse sauntered off still laughing and, laughing, met with another spirit of mischief: and took a handful of her bright curls and yanked back her head and fastened his mouth, she all willing, upon hers; and went with her. And as they went, arms entwined, confided to her his recent encounter with that tub-thumping prophet of doom and disaster, Captain Benjamin Briggs. 'I don't know the man,' she'd say.

'And never will; not in any sense.'

'What will you bet?' she must have said.

What would he bet?—that she would not cast the honey toils of her charms about the body and soul of Captain Benjamin Briggs? Well, she coveted a gold cross such as was worn by so many of her kind, whose hearts were so strangely more innocent than their poor, misused bodies; who said their prayers and knew a God more merciful than the Great Avenger of Captain Briggs, the God of the harlots who looked with compassion upon the life that poverty and want and often just a natural physical pleasure had led them to—a gold cross with her name on it, Mary Sellers. When his pleasure had had its fill of her—and

she was generous with her wares—he promised her: never mind any wager, you shall have your gift anyway. Which gift she suggested, thinking it over, plotting it all out carefully in her mischievous, clever mind—would make her task the easier.

And so, wearing the cross, in her dark dress, wrapped in her great black shawl—Honey Mary crouched weeping theatrical tears at the foot of a tall pillar among the bustling waterside throng; and Sarah Briggs, ignorant, innocent, eager, compassionate—leaned over the rail of the brigantine Amazon and beckoned her doom aboard.

And the slow plot unfolded—conceived in a spirit of mischief with no thought of the terror to come—and the game was played out and, as she moved away through the crowds with pretended reluctance on that man's arm, my husband weighed the gold cross in his hand and asked me, should he go after her to her salvation? And I answered, yes.

When at last he came back, I looked into his face and recalled the cold ferocity of his marital embracings; and I knew it all.

The next day being a Sabbath, we went to church. I wonder if he felt as I did that sly glances followed us, exchange of grinning smiles, mocking laughter when we were beyond earshot of it. I think he did not. He held himself so high in his own sight, he knew himself so well to be the feared, the revered, the untouched, the untouchable and most righteous of men, that he would not for a moment dream that any could suspect that he had fallen, momentarily, from the tall pedestal of his almost ferocious respectability. Nor would he suppose, knowing nothing of the wager, that she would trouble to comment on it, that he would count as anything

but just another of a harlot's customers, no more, no less. This man or that, she would hardly recall which had come to her easy bed. He had gone to preach and stayed to fall, but what would that be to her? Many men, no doubt, might come to love her for that sweetness that was in her, despite all the rest; would try to convert her, to bring her to love them alone, to forsake this life and marry them; (for what she had said to the contrary had been all a lie to win her wager, to bring him to this pass in which he was now). Many men, at any rate, would wish to alter her way of life; and he be only one more. So he would argue to himself; would believe, still, simply that she had repented, promised herself reformation—and failed. By the time he had come to her, she had been back in her old ways; and, thinking no more of him than of any other man, had dragged him down with her. With what agonised fervour would he inwardly suffer to wash away the memory of that sin; against what threatened danger to his spiritual pride, would he convince himself that none of all those who admired and respected him, would ever come to know of it!

As it transpired, strange to relate, none ever did.

They had invited him into the pulpit; and he preached there with all his accustomed strength and conviction, and I saw, as always, tears in many eyes and the purpose of amendment on many faces. But his sermon mentioned nothing, for once, of the evils of the sins of the flesh. He walked back with me on his arm, stern, erect, quiet, outwardly impregnable; and when we came face to face with Honey Mary strolling by with her hands linked into the arms of two jolly sailors, carefree and laughing, no glance was exchanged between any of us. Only I felt his muscles grow taut beneath my hand; and relax again when she had gone safely by.

The next day, Monday, he called his first mate to come with him and stood on the quay pointing up to the bows of the ship. He was carrying out his intention to rechristen the Amazon. I had thought he might call her after my name, Sarah Jane, but he had no such thought, I believe. He had not, at any rate, consulted me. I think my preferences in such affairs as this mattered to him not at all; indeed, I was hard put to it to know in what way I did matter to him. They were astonished, I know, when he chose me for his wife; but none more astonished, as I have said—both before and after the marriage—than I.

I am old now but I look back to the girl I was then: a pretty girl—almost a beautiful girl, though in a very different way from that magnificent, flamboyant, flaunting, and yet hauntingly sweet beauty of Honey Mary's. *My* looks were in the fine delicate skin that goes with pale auburn hair, the skin beneath which the colour comes and goes, not a fine, matt skin as hers was, a goldeny-cream. And the moulding of my face was very fine, the bones were beautiful, a small nose, a mouth like a flower and brown eyes, rare, I think, with my colour of hair. A thin young creature, yet prettily rounded enough—enough for him anyway, most evidently. But, for the rest... I suppose no girl more dreamily vague, more inapt in learning, more unpractical, and more totally without self-confidence as a result, ever wandered through the little world of my narrow home town, where all was briskness and handiness and ability. My mother was ashamed, despaired of me, my sisters left me contemptuously to my own drifting dreams, my brothers were fine, strong, manly boys and troubled with me not at all. Only my father, who perhaps lived also in dreams, though they were dreams only of goodness and Godliness—only he did not despair over me but laboured to

teach and guide me, to imbue me with his own strong, pure and immutable principles. Vague, helpless, hopeless—in my own eyes and those of all others who knew me bordering upon downright stupidity—yet within, I know now, looking back over it all, he had forged for me a rod of pure silver, through and through. Why else am I here? Why else are they two where they have so long been?

On that Monday, then, he stood with his first mate, Richardson, looking up to where two men swung on a cradle lowered from the foredeck to the ship's bows, with paint pots in their hands. They were to delete the name Amazon and inscribe there whatever name he had chosen; doubtless, though I did not, they already knew it. Peaked cap pushed back on his dark head, hands plunged into his jacket pockets against the cold, he stood there looking up, with no thoughts, I suppose, of anything but the work in hand; no thought certainly of Honey Mary and her wicked ways. And Honey Mary came up beside him quietly and slid her hand through his arm and, in easy familiarity, stood beside him there.

I was leaning in my useless, idle way over the deck rail, looking down—what else had I to do with my days? And I saw how once again my husband turned grey white beneath the brown skin, how he jerked away from her and made some exclamation that in another man would have been an oath. The mate, astounded, took her by the shoulder and clearly bade her begone. She looked into his face and laughed and he also lost colour and then flushed red across his tan. ‘Trot away, little man,’ she seemed to say to him, ‘or I shall tell tales of you to this stern master of yours, that will lose you your berth in his fine ship, Amazon.’ He was not a little man but a fine, upstanding fellow and yet, indeed, he

turned and moved away. But my husband, I think, had spoken a word also. ‘Leave me to deal with her,’ no doubt he said.

And so into my world of reconstructed dialogue again. ‘Well, well, my fine Captain, so you would deny old friends?’

‘Go away from me, woman, get away from me! How dare you approach me like this?’

‘Why, Captain, it was you who approached *me*, but two days ago: and approached very close indeed.’

‘All that’s forgotten, buried deep, covered over; get away from me now and no more trouble me.’

‘Ah, but it’s you who now trouble *me*, Captain Briggs. For you tell me to forget, but how can I forget such an hour as that which we two spent together—?’

‘I came to save your soul. You with your wickedness came very near to condemning mine to everlasting perdition.’

‘How happy a perdition, however, since we shall share it together!’

‘Get away, get away!’ he will have cried, turning about and about as though a venomous insect troubled him.

‘How can I go when all this body hungers for your body again?’

I saw how he made to leave her, if she would not leave *him*; but she caught him by the arm. Did she whisper to him then that threat of blackmail?—that threat which amounted to blackmail, against his great reputation for Godliness and good. Did she say: ‘Shall I tell all the world how I crave for your kisses and yet you will leave me?’ Did he, succumbing to blackmail, ask her: ‘What will you take to let me be?’

I saw her glance up to where the men stood on the hanging cradle, staring down, wondering. The price of her

silence?’—‘Name your ship after me!’

And proclaim his hideous wrong-doing to all the world! ‘You know that’s impossible, you know I could never do that.’

‘Well, then...’ And the mischievous, teasing smile, taunting him, threatening him. I think that she meant him no harm; not really. She thought him a self-righteous, preaching prig and would teach him a lesson; I think she never dreamt of the cringing terror within his soul at the thought that his world of high reputation might tumble about his ears. Or, Morehouse, perhaps, without some outward sign would not credit her story of conquest, simply could not believe it accomplished so easily. At any rate, ‘Come, Captain, you know my name, it’s written on the cross you so considerately brought back to me—’

‘And betrayed,’ he would bitterly acknowledge.

‘And having betrayed it, must now write up on your ship’s bows the name inscribed upon it. Mary Sellers. Come, call it up to your men!’

‘You know that I can’t. Anything else. Money; I’ve paid you already. I’ll pay you yet more to hold your wicked tongue.’

‘My wicked tongue has touched your lips, Captain Briggs, and all the world shall know of it if you won’t do me this simple favour—paint my name up there!’

‘If I leave the name as it is,’ he mutters, poor wretch, ‘it will suit you well enough.’

‘Then write Mary Sellers, Amazon. Or Mary Sellers, Harlot or Whore or Mary Sellers my own Bad Angel or what you will; but Mary Sellers it must be.’ And she clung to his arm, looking up at him, laughing, teasing, and all the world looking on. ‘I’ll call her by your name, Mary,’ he said at last. ‘That will satisfy your vanity and no one need know of it.’

‘Mary Sellers,’ she insisted and swung herself about—I watched from the deck, keeping back out of sight, sick with fear for him, sick with compassion—and hung her arms now about his neck and raised her face as though he must stoop to kiss her. ‘Come, lover, give to Mary Sellers that hot, sweet mouth of yours, and say no more of refusal to paint her name upon your ship’s bows as yours is painted in letters of hell fire across her heart

Who knows what in fact she said? Who knows how far her wickedness took her, that wickedness that was in those early days but a sort of mischief really, a sort of malicious teasing, a sort of punishment for his strictures on sins in her, which in fact were sins of his own commissioning. I know at least that he wrenched her arms from his neck, flung her away from him, called up sharply to the men; and that the name M—a—r—y slowly appeared over the blotted-out name of Amazon. But when he came to the second name, his heart failed him. He compromised; and so the name Mary Celeste was blazoned across the brigantine’s bows, that has ever since been blazoned across the memory of men’s minds whenever mention is made of great mysteries of the sea.

From that day on, he worked with feverish haste to be gone. In the hurry of loading, two kegs of alcohol were dropped, stoving in the longboat which any such vessel as the brigantine would carry, as well as the small boat-yawl with its single sail. But the delay in repairing it was too much for him and he would not wait. On 6 November, five days before she had been due to leave, the newly christened Mary Celeste set sail from New York, Genoa bound.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS COLD BUT bright in those first days out from New York but there was a strong wind ahead, and we anchored for the night off Staten Island so that it was actually on Tuesday, 7 November that, in a light breeze, we sailed down the quiet waters and at last out into the ocean. For the first time I knew what it was to be out of sight of land, a tiny world alone, encompassed by the shining sea.

I had been at first enchanted by my trim little new home, the ship so shining and pretty at her moorings, loading her cargo. We had travelled separately down from Marion, the ship being sailed round by a skeleton crew, my husband meanwhile seeing to her papers and picking up more hands in New York. The accommodation was cramped enough, the cabin I shared with my husband a narrow room, only six foot wide by twelve or fourteen long, with a water closet at one end, curtained off; and a double bunk in the next corner, a window at each end looking out on to the top deck, and a swinging oil lamp. There was no access to the deck, you must pass through a door at one corner, cross the saloon and so go up the companion-way to the after-deck, ducking your head in the low doorway, stepping over the high sill that in heavy seas would keep out waters sweeping across the deck. ‘Companion-way’—‘afterdeck’—the terms come back to me but I have forgotten most of them—indeed in the short time I spent aboard that ship or any ship, I never learned the difference between port and starboard and hardly know it now; and though my life had been spent in a town on the waterfront, I never could understand them as other girls learned to, going aboard ship

for visits, talking with sailor men—halyards, bollards, top-gallants and winches, I could no more understand it all than fly. I shall have to say simply what I mean and if I name these things wrongly or give them no nautical names at all—well, I am very old, for many, many years, if I have spoken at all, have spoken in a language not my own, and anyway have long forgotten what little I ever knew...

So—it was all very pretty and charming, but I soon found that there was little enough for me to do. Always humble and unsure, I had been afraid at first of failing in my marital duties but, as they had been from the day of my wedding, my duties remained confined to the night hours and consisted then only in passivity; lying passive beneath the weight of his violence breaking out from the repression of his long life of celibate virtue—passive, a victim, and as such in myself a reproach. My first timid efforts at reciprocity met only with a shocked disgust and so I desisted. A God-fearing man. For the rest...

For the rest—what was there to do but dream? All my life I had retreated from the insecurities of my childhood into a world of make-believe where I was no longer incompetent Sarah, but a creature of beauty and brilliance, all free from fear; and now increasingly the days dragged by, I fell into fantasies that would obliterate the dread of the nights to follow, and so passed gradually into a world of unrealities, as frightened children do. Perhaps in those days I was indeed not much more than that—a frightened child. A frightened child with a woman's burdens to bear.

On the first morning out to sea, I was up early. I said to my husband, 'Shall I help with the breakfast—?'

'With the breakfast?' he said, as though astonished.

'Shall I not do something to help with the meals? I'm quite ready to work.'

‘You’re the Master’s wife,’ he said. ‘Don’t meddle with what’s not your business.’

Heaven knows, I was no cook but I had in me always a rather pathetic eagerness to pick myself up off the ground, and try all over again. I said, ‘Isn’t cooking my business? At any rate, I could lay out the table. I have nothing else to do.’

‘If you would practise your music,’ he said, ‘and learn to play this thing that has cost so much money and trouble, you would give your husband at least some small pleasure in return for all this unearned leisure.’

This was my melodeon, his wedding gift to me: so that I might play to him the simple hymn tunes that brought balm to his tormented soul. Did he ever recognise, I wonder, that it was hardly a gift to me, who loving music, had yet no aptitude for it, but a gift to himself. Well, if it was, he derived little joy from it; my long, inapt fingers would not master the keys, my hands would droop at the wrists, I would fall as ever into my clouds of abstraction. I would see myself strong and beautiful, I would see myself standing in the bows of a ship more magnificent than the little brigantine, I would see myself petrified into the very figurehead at her prow, hands folded over my bosom, head thrust forward into the silver spray, hair blown back... (Did it ever occur to me how *she* would have looked, Honey Mary, with those heavy curls tossed back by the wind of the ship’s swift voyaging through the shining waters? If ever there was a woman to serve as model for a ship’s figurehead, it was she.)

That first dinner time, my husband came to the cabin and led me through into the saloon where a long table was laid for three with benches on two sides of it. The saloon was about fourteen feet by twelve, but a corner was taken out of it for the first mate’s cabin and a second corner for

the pantry, with the steps, the companion-way if I have it right, leading up to the top deck, between these two. The whole was lighted from overhead by the raised skylight of glass.

The first mate was Richardson, that one who had stood with my husband looking up at the painted name upon the bows, who had flushed red when Mary turned her teasing eyes upon him. From New England, as were my husband and myself, something under thirty, well set up, unlike most sailors clean shaven, with a pleasant face and smooth black hair, fair skinned beneath the tan. Quick with a joke or a piece of repartee. But rough enough; his ill manners revolted me, sprawling in his place, shovelling up his food with the blade of his knife, tilting the plate to tip the gravy into his mouth. My husband said at last: ‘There’s a woman present. Need you eat like a dog?’

‘A dog would bend over and lap up the food,’ said Richardson; adding a placatory, ‘Sir. After all, would he not?’

‘We had a little dog at home,’ I said, ‘would take a mouthful off the tip of a fork; and very daintily.’

‘I am saying that Mr Richardson is not a dog,’ said my husband.

‘What sort of dog would you be, Mr Richardson, if you must be a dog at all? I think *I’d* be our little dog at home, spoilt pet that he was.’

‘Well, and if you’d feed me tidbits from a fork, Mrs Briggs, so would I.’

‘You are talking rubbish,’ said my husband. ‘What meaningless nonsense is this, in the mouths of grown-up people?’

‘But it’s what’s in the mouth of a little pet dog,’ I said, meaning only to speak lightly.

He got up and edged his way out from between the bench and the table, both clamped to the floor, and went off up the companion-way. Richardson rose to his feet also, leaving his knife and fork straddled across his plate. ‘Now, Mrs Briggs, we’ve deprived ourselves, like children, of our pudding.’

I knew I’d been childish and silly; my heart failed within me. ‘It was my fault,’ I said sadly; and I thought, A fine beginning! and knew that I should never be fit for a captain’s wife, any more than I could become the figurehead of a beautiful great ship, carrying her forward with my raised head and my backward blowing locks, across the shining sea... A wooden figurehead with backward blown curls and no heart to suffer despair and dread... The care fell away from me, I felt the bright sun in my eyes and the fresh salt spray across my face, I lifted my head... Mr Richardson’s voice said into my far-away thoughts, ‘Mrs Briggs, forgive me Ma’am, I’ll not say it again, I mean you no offence. I had not recognised it till this moment, but—you are a very beautiful lady.’

A very beautiful lady. Honey Mary’s words dragged me back to crude reality. A woman’s good looks need not make her bad, I had said to her; and she had answered me: ‘You don’t know men.’

Failure then; failure. The steward came in with a steaming roll of plum duff but I motioned to the empty table and crept back to my cabin. Not much later than noon, and all the day to crawl through and then—the night. I sat down at the melodeon and tried to understand the black patches of the notes, blurred to greyness by unshed tears. How can I please him, why did he marry me? What am I to do with my life? I should have a child, I supposed, should have children; but I knew myself to be not fitted yet to undertake the care

of a child, of a fragile creature that would be at the mercy of these hands so narrow and white with their long fingers and pretty oval nails—yet so strangely inept. I prayed with all my heart that I need not yet be exposed to so frightening a role, so far beyond my capacities. At home they had constantly told me what a fool I was. I thought I was not a fool; but I knew that I was foolish. I was too foolish and dreaming to wish to bear the heavy responsibility of bringing up a child. I was still a child myself. And yet what else was there for me?

My sewing-machine stood all ready, but what was there to sew? My neat work-box with its needle-case and cotton reels was untouched. I could almost have torn off a button or two to create the necessity for stitching them back on again. Should I then employ myself by learning to understand something of the ship? Filled with that sudden eagerness—pathetic to look back upon, that eager courage with which I would put aside my fears and go forth all freshly expectant, only to meet the more rebuffs that were but too sure to come!—I wrapped myself in warm shawls and went up on deck, my pale hair blown in straight strands across my face, escaping from its shining, smooth bands, wound about my head. Stooping, I stepped over the high sill across the doorway, with its strip of criss-crossed brass, and looked up at the two men on the poop deck, just opposite. I thought they exchanged glances as they looked back at me; and then they raised their heads and stared up into the rigging as though something were amiss there. But up in the rigging, I think nothing was amiss.

The poop deck is in the stern of the ship, raised up, maybe four or five foot from the main deck; at either side there were steps up to it and across its front edge, a wooden rail with a row of brass-bound firebuckets set under the rail.

Above my head and behind me the great sails arched themselves out, wind-filled, bowling the vessel along. I called to the men: 'May I come up and speak with you?'

They lowered their gaze to mine; exchanged glances, nodded and shrugged. I lifted my wind-blown skirt up from my insteps and climbed up to the deck, one hand holding the shawl close about me, and so began my pitiful little gropings for knowledge. I said: 'I feel that if my life is to be at sea, I should know about my husband's ship.'

'And all who sail in her?' said Gilling, the second mate, standing with his hand on the wheel; and looked up into the shrouds again.

'Well, yes,' I said. 'Of course I'd like to come to know the crew. We shall be—three or four weeks at least, indeed more, I suppose, to Genoa? And perhaps make the voyage back together?'

'As to that, I think it's hardly likely, Ma'am,' said Gilling, exchanging a glance with the other.

From the first I liked Richardson and tolerated the rest; but I never liked Gilling. He was, I think, a mean-minded man; very strong and rough, brown bearded with cold, pale blue eyes. I think there was no warmth in him, no affection, no loyalty, he was a man who walked alone. He was a New Yorker and I believe unmarried. He would not be one to care for a family of his own and a home.

The other man with him was a German, an East Prussian in fact, from some of the tiny islands in the Baltic Sea, one of two brothers named Lorenzen, Volkert and Boz. Two more of the crew were from East Prussia also—they made fine sailors, I believe, highly educated for their station in life and for the most part steady-going and quiet; and the one, I suppose, would introduce others of his race and so four had come together in the *Mary Celeste*, out of a crew of

eight in all. Martens and Goodschaad, the others were named—Mart and Good the men called them, but I never could discover much of good in either. They were, all four, shortish men, square and thickset, very strong, with powerful rounded arms and, when they rolled up their trouser-legs to swab decks, strong, rounded calves; indeed they were rounded men altogether, rather bulging, rounded men, they reminded me of the Flemish paintings by the brothers Breughel in a picture book at home; I came to think of them collectively as The Breughels. They habitually went barefoot aboard, but then, except for the chief mate and the Captain, so did all the men. Martens was the oldest of the crew. The youngest was the cook and steward, a boy from New York, not very bright in the intellect, whose name was Edward Head. They called him Tedhead or more often Blockhead which might suit him well enough but must surely have pushed him yet further back into his dull vacuity: did I not know? But mostly, with the wits of a child, he was known simply as 'the boy'.

It was Boz Lorenzen who stood on the poop deck with Gilling. I followed their glance up to the shrouds and the great sails bellying there. 'Will you tell me their names?'

'Whose names?' said Boz. 'Dose wot sails in der Mary Celeste?'

'No, the sails up there. Should there not be the one great sail?'

'She's been divided up,' said Gilling, 'for easier handling.'

'Don't most ships have three masts?'

'This is a brigantine,' said Gilling. 'Or a half-brig, in fact. What they call a hermaphrodite only Cap'n Briggs don't like the word.' He glanced slyly at the other man.

'Dere's many verds Cap'n Briggs isn't liking,' said the

German. 'It comes hard on a man, all de time minding his tongue.' He grumbled: 'No dice, no grog, no swearing—vot a man does mit his time aboard such a ship?'

'I wonder you should join her if you feel so dissatisfied,' I said, out of loyalty.

'I din't had no choice,' said the man shrugging. Gilling explained: 'Boz and Volk lost all in their last berth, wrecked and nothing saved but their lives.'

'So now we take what berth we can westwards and get back to our home. For tree yearss I am not seeing my girl.' His heavy round face grew thoughtful and sad. I said: 'Do you long for her?'

'I tink she is not true to me,' he said, bluntly. 'Tree yearss is long time. And dere is udder mens.'

'Few enough,' said Gilling, rallying him. 'You've told me that in your whole island there's six hundred souls.'

'And two hundert is men,' said Boz; but he laughed.

'Have you children,' I said, 'or a child? When you say your girl, do you mean your wife?'

'I haf child, yes,' said Boz. 'But when I say my girl, no—I'm not meanink my wife.' He laughed again.

'Sailed away in good time?' said Gilling, laughing too.

'When I sailed, I vos not knowing,' said Boz. He shrugged. 'No matter—better for keep udder men away. When I get back, I marrying.' He saw perhaps my look of concern. 'You thinking bad, Mrs Briggs. But not so very bad. Mine mudder, nine childern, is married, mine brudder, tree childern is married: only I, one child, is not. But two out of tree—not so bad, eh?' I thought that all the same his heart bled a little still, under the laughter.

I had thought of them less as individuals, more as merely a pack of roving seamen, picking up a living from this quayside or that as chance arose, loyal to no one ship

and no one master, to no woman, to no home; brought together by nothing in common but the ship they sailed in for a few weeks of too close companionship, until they moved on, uncaring—rough, untaught, each out for himself and no other; from very childhood each a man and each his own man and no other's. But they were persons in their own right, after all, and I felt myself the less for having thought less of them.

I believed I had troubled them long enough and wandered off, with a word of thanks, moving about the decks, asking a man here or there what was this object called, or that, and what was its purpose. The fore deckhouse was smaller than the main deckhouse where my own cabin was, and the saloon—and yet must be divided off into a cabin for the second mate, and the galley with a bunk for the cook; leaving a space of nine foot by seven for the crew's quarters, with two two-tiered bunks and a table and benches. Across the upper bunks curtains were hung so that men might get some sleep by day, who had been on the night watches—what sleep they got while the rest ate, talked, gambled around the table, who knows? From both upper bunks, at any rate, came the sound of heavy snoring and I hastily withdrew my head; what might my husband not make of my actually looking into a room where men were a-bed? The galley had a real stove in it with a chimney, and heavy pots bubbled furiously, copper and iron. I knew to my cost, already, that Tedhead's idea of a meal was to boil everything to shreds and dish it up swimming in water or weak gravy. I said into a fog of cabbage-smelling steam, 'This isn't tonight's meal cooking already?'

He was a tallish boy, yellow-haired with the strong, twangy accent of New York's docks. He said: 'You don't

want the grub raw?’

‘But while the vegetables are fresh, Ted... Half an hour would do, even for this great potful. And then you needn’t squeeze out the water so hard, the leaves could be quite loose and separate.’ Green vegetables came to the table pressed hard and cut into square chunks. ‘And this poor bit of bacon—’

He flung back the ladle into a saucepan with a great splash of liquid that sizzled and stank on the hot iron surface of the stove. ‘You want you should do the work yourself?’ Martens stood in the entrance, Breughel-dwarfish and heavy. ‘First it’s the Master preaching hell and damnation,’ the boy said to him, ‘because I let out a yell when I dropped hot fat on my hand; now it’s the woman coming telling me to dish up raw ham and cabbage leaves. I never knew such a berth. I wish already I was out of it.’

‘Giving anudder yell and *she’ll* being out quick enough,’ said Martens, grinning. ‘She’s not liking bad words, no more dan de Captain does.’ He jerked a thumb. ‘Come, lady, dis ain’t no place for you, go where you belonging.’ And he grinned again. ‘On de lower deck you’ll maybe finding better companies.’ I think that I flinched away, mystified that they should be so rough and hostile and he added, winking across at the boy. ‘Below deck is where is keeping de pigs unt der hens.’

A couple of poor sea-sick piglets for slaughtering on the voyage to provide fresh meat; a coop full of hens for eggs. On this trip, however, we carried none; I think that in his panic rush to leave New York and Mary Sellers, my husband would not wait for livestock; and I was thankful enough not to have to think of them, cooped up and stifling down there. I turned away sadly and leaned in my old way on the rail and looked down at the rush of the water against the side of

the ship and thought how wide was the ocean, limitless about me and how bright; and how wide was the world into which the past few weeks had brought me—and how dark.

That evening the boy slapped down upon the table a piece of bacon, barely cooked, a dish of potatoes hard at the centre and a bowl of hot raw cabbage leaves. The chief mate was at the wheel, the second mate ate with us. My husband said: ‘What’s this?’

‘*Her* orders,’ said Tedhead with a crude gesture in my direction.

‘Her orders, whose orders? Do you speak of your Captain’s wife with a jerk of your thumb?’

‘Mrs Briggs told him the way she wished the food cooked, sir,’ said Gilling. To me he added, with sneering triumph: ‘I regret, Ma’am, already the men are complaining.’

‘Go,’ said my husband to the steward. Tedhead disappeared back into the pantry. My husband said: ‘Madam, what is this?’

‘I only said that... He’s only a boy, he doesn’t understand...’

‘And you an older woman, I suppose, and accomplished ship’s cook?’ And indeed, the boy was older than I by two or three years, I daresay, and I knew only what my mother had taught me and all those officious sisters, complaining, ‘You’re all fingers and thumbs, can’t you so much as cook a cabbage leaf?’ If I had been a little cleverer, cleverer in my mind or cleverer in my hands, either one or the other!—but I was neither, I was nothing. I thought how happy it might all have been, the Master’s wife brisk, capable, and yet charming them all into ready acquiescence, revolutionising the dreary intake of necessary food into meals that, even when the fresh food had given way to conserved meat and

dried pulses, would be a pleasure after each spell of hard work. I thought of a jolly crew, vying with one another to satisfy my questioning, explain things to me, until all the world of sail would speak of young Mrs Briggs, ‘knows as much about her ship as the Master does’; in my mind’s eye, I saw the crew lining up after each voyage to wish me God speed and thank me, caps off and three cheers for the mistress of the *Mary Celeste*... The boy’s harsh voice broke in: ‘Shall I bring in the duff, sir? It’s from the dinner hour, heated up. It wasn’t eaten then.’

My fault, my foolish fault that a meal of raw bacon and uncooked vegetables should be followed by a soggy mess of heated-up plum duff, heavy as lead. I saw the triumphant gleam in the mate’s cold blue eye and I thought, what have they got against me? Why should they resent me? What mistake have I made?

I am a figurehead, a wooden figurehead all painted in gay colours in the sparkle of the sunshine, in the fine white spray; and if when storms arise I am lashed by the waves of my husband’s wrath, foundering beneath the heavy seas of his loveless lust—at least a painted wooden figurehead has no heart to break...

Two more days passed and on the third day my heart broke and for ever. For my husband being asleep in the cabin after a night disturbed by some trouble with the steering, or I know not what, I heard muffled laughter and went out on to the deck—and she was there.

CHAPTER V

I WAS WEARING THAT day my dress of a pale sepia, with bands of amber brown which I knew lighted up the colour of my eyes; what talents I had lay in such directions as this. But what was I in my pale auburns and ambers?—against all that opulence of honey and scarlet? For the dark dress was gone now and the black shawl and indeed I never saw them again and can only suppose they'd been borrowed to serve her purpose; she wore a brilliant scarlet with a heavy white braiding. Nor was this gown high to the throat as the other had been, but with a low, rounded neck, with buttons up the front of the bodice, but the buttons left carelessly open right down to the frilled white edge of her bodice. So creamy her slender throat was and her beautiful shoulders and bosom!—that golden creaminess, set off by the blue-white of white cambric and lace. About her shoulders hung a Paisley shawl in bright colours: with what abandon of her beautiful body had she paid for that Paisley shawl?

Outrage opposed to cool mischief, we confronted one another. Panic fear—a pretended alarm. Innocence—experience; wantonness—virtue. The tigress amiably purring and the trembling white doe. But as though we were conspirators in some childish naughtiness, she turned her eyes towards the cabin where my husband slept, put her finger to her lips to hush me and beckoned me to follow her to the fore deck, further from harm's way.

Two men had dodged back into the shelter of the companion-way but now emerged and came with us. When we were out of earshot of the cabin, Volkert Lorenzen came up with me and caught me by the arm. He muttered, low-

voiced, glancing fearfully aft towards the stern deckhouse, 'Stowaway. Crew not knowing nothing. I swear; tell the Master, crew not knowing.'

She led the way to where the roof of the fore deckhouse, where the crew lived, was raised six feet above the level of the deck, and in its shelter, stopped and turned to me. I stopped also, standing there, rigid with terror; so much, I think, in those days was ascribed to faults in myself that I believe it was the terror of guilt, as though J had been panty to her coming aboard. She saw something of my utter abandonment to fear, I suppose, for she put out her hand and touched my arm, looking at me kindly and pityingly. 'Come, Sarah,' she said. 'Don't be so anxious. I mean you no harm.'

'For God's sake,' I stammered out, 'what are you doing here?'

'Whatever she's doing,' said Gilling, laughing, 'it'll not be for God's sake.' And he put his arm about her waist in a familiar gesture. 'Wicked bitch, what could you mean by it? —smuggling yourself aboard and none of us knowing all this while.' He glanced meaningly at me. I stammered: 'She's been hidden aboard all this time?'

'Well, I haven't just swum out to you,' she said, always laughing; leaning back negligently against the wall of the cabin, her hair shining in the cold, bright sunlight reflected back by the mirror of the sea.

'No one knowing anything?'

'Only poor witless Blockhead,' said Gilling, 'smuggling food to her.'

'He didn't know I'd come aboard,' she said quickly. 'Don't make trouble for him. Once I'd revealed myself, he couldn't let me starve, and he's only a child, the great innocent hobbledehoy.' She looked at me as Gilling had,

and Volkert Lorenzen earlier. ‘Be sure to tell the Captain that.’

I couldn’t take it in, I stood staring at her, unable to believe my eyes. ‘You’ve been here, aboard—? *Why?* Why have you come, what do you want?’ But deep, deep in my heart, far beyond my wits’ understanding, I knew what she wanted. She had not done yet with the soul of Captain Benjamin Briggs.

‘Just an ocean voyage,’ she said, airily, ‘and to see foreign places.’

‘You can’t hope to remain until we touch land, and he not know of it? And he shall know of it this day; and when he knows of it—’

‘Well, and what when he knows of it?’ she said, raising a wicked eyebrow, teasing me. ‘What will he do?’

‘He’ll put about and take you back to New York, that’s what he’ll do.’

‘My poor little Sarah,’ she said, ‘I fear, you know, that he’ll not be able to do that. For what a tale would be told—and who would tell it!—of how the high and mighty, the God-fearing, tub-thumping, righteous Captain Briggs had kept a waterfront harlot all this time aboard his ship, pretending never to be aware of it—he who knows every nook and cranny of any vessel he sails in, and watches every move of his men

‘None will ever suppose for one moment that he brought you aboard.’

‘They’ll suppose it all right,’ she said, ‘for I’ll tell them that he did.’

I was confounded, my mind was a misted maze of twistings and turnings, I hardly knew what I said or did. I burst out at last: ‘But why should you do this to him, why should you try to harm him?’

‘With his preachings and moralisings,’ she said, ‘has he not tried to harm me? With his warnings of hell fire to poor sinners wanting only to hold a woman in their arms after the long journey or at the start of a new one. Coming to me, trying to frighten me by threats of hell and damnation from my only way of earning a crust of bread

My eyes filled with tears. ‘You said you repented. You asked him to help you.’

‘Poor little Sarah,’ she said again. And her eyes lost their laughter, she turned to the two men. ‘My heart misgives me,’ she said. ‘I’d forgotten her, this poor, bewildered girl. I don’t want to injure *her*.’

Gilling shrugged it off roughly. ‘Let her hold her tongue and he need never know that you’re here.’

‘He soon finds her, Andy,’ said Lorenzen. ‘He is putting in everyver this sharp nose of his.’

‘He’ll not put it into a curtained-off bunk where a man lies snoring.’

They exchanged glances and all three went off into laughter; and I saw it all, or in part at least, I saw it. I said: ‘She’s no stowaway. You smuggled her aboard, you’ve all known of it all along.’

‘Well, no matter,’ said Gilling, ‘as long as you don’t tell *him*. It’s him you want to protect, so keep quiet, let us enjoy our pleasures and he’ll be none the worse off and none the wiser.’

‘But I wish him to be the wiser,’ said Mary. ‘Do you think it was for you that I cajoled the crew to bring me aboard? You flatter yourselves—what I’ve done since has been simply to pay you off—and handsomely enough I suppose you’ll agree?—you and brother Bob; and Marten’s turn will come and Good’s, who already grows crazy with hunger. I may even have to fob off the hobbledoehoy, I

daresay, with some feeble pretences.' She made a little grimace, shrugging. I said: 'You're vile. You're disgusting.'

She looked me over with a sort of compassion. 'Poor Sarah,' she said for the third time. 'Have you already learned something of the vile and disgusting? It wouldn't surprise me.'

I felt the hot flush rise to my face, too well aware of a common knowledge which she referred to. It had never been spoken of between my husband and me—God forbid!—but I knew what had happened that day that he went to her; I knew. Sick with shameful memories, I was too overt in my reply. I said stiffly: 'I am a married woman.'

So much sweetness there was in her: I will say it always, despite all that happened—so much of sweetness! She looked at me almost with tenderness. 'Poor little married woman,' she said. 'You are too good for all of us.'

The sun shone down, the cold, clear winter sun, and scattered the sea with brilliants. There was a following wind, we were under full sail, the whole ship seemed straining forward like a greyhound on the leash, with the slap, slap of the water against the hull and the ceaseless creaking and groaning of the rigging which had become already a part of the background of one's life. She keeled a little to one side—to port, to starboard, (I've told you I never mastered more than a word or two of nautical jargon, and indeed what chance had I?—that was the last hour of any peace of mind I ever had aboard the brig, which bore her very name, the *Mary Sellers*, the *Mary Celeste*)—and cut her way through the heaving waters with their white spray splashing the tips of the ever shifting, moving, gently rolling world of waves. The salt breeze blew across my face as I stood there, I felt it cool and fresh and invigorating as though I had fainted and a flask of smelling salts was being

passed under my nostrils. It seemed to pull me together, to help collect my thoughts from sheer, blundering protest and helplessness; from the ludicrous idea that in all this I was as much to blame as they. I said to Mary: 'May I not speak with you, alone?'

It was then that I learned for the first time that her name was not given to her for her colouring alone, but for her habit of endearment—which, however, may indeed have arisen from the nickname and not come before it—of using 'my honey' as one might say my dear or my darling. She used it with a touch of the Southern accent which perhaps she had picked up from the darkies along the waterfront. 'My honey,' she would say or 'my honey sweet,' and she said it now. 'Why, my honey!—do you think you'll wheedle me with those young griefs of yours out of my fell purpose? For you won't, you know.'

'You teach him Mary!' said Gilling, urging her on to wickedness. 'We'll have him the talk of the watersides half across the world.'

'What has he ever done to you?' I said. Nothing. I think life had dealt to Andrew Gilling many vicious blows and he returned them blindly, not caring who suffered, as a chained dog will bark and snap at all who pass by. He shrugged and grinned. 'I like to see the bear baited,' he said.

'And you, Volkert? I know that my husband has done wrong—'

I thought that Mary gave me a sharp glance, as though to bid me say no more and for the first time in my maze of unformulated uncertainties, it came to me that the men might not know of her hold over him, that this was a secret power she hugged to herself and would wield as it suited her alone. I said, 'I know that my husband has done what you think a wrong to you all, in condemning your ways in

preaching against you, against what he thinks of as sins. But he's truly sincere in it...' I caught her eye with a different look in it this time and my voice trailed off. Volkert said, growling: 'Some is married men. If such talk is reaching my home

'We don't sail in northern waters.'

'Who knows vere a ship may sail or vere news may travellingk?'

'Will it really be news,' said Mary, 'that Volk and Boz Lorenzen have not abstained from a bite at the apple now and then, throughout three long years of starvation?'

'And with such an orchard to feast in,' said Gilling, putting out a hand towards Mary in a crude caress.

She turned aside his arm, glancing at me. 'Behave yourself in decent company,' she said; and suddenly: 'Someone coming!'

Soft soles, padding along the deck. She stepped back into the shadow of the companion-way and would have disappeared altogether from sight, I suppose, but it was the first mate, Richardson. He paused when he saw me standing there with Gilling and Volkert, stopped dead when he saw Mary, and said with a stream of oaths that shocked my soul, 'What are you doing above decks?'

'Oh, come, Bert,' she said, 'I'm doing no harm. He's asleep in his cabin, and I stifle in that pigsty below.'

'You must stay in the deckhouse.'

'It's worse than the pigsty itself, always one or another snoring in his bunk.'

'You've done a bit of snoring in a bunk yourself,' said Gilling, ever laughing.

'When this white lamb popped her innocent head in—and removed it as quickly when she knew herself—oh, dear! —in the presence of men a-bed!'

‘Men and women,’ said Volk. He put back his head and roared with laughter. ‘Ve two making some fine music, Mary, vasn’t it?—for frighten her away.’

‘Be quiet, you affront her,’ said Richardson. To me he said: ‘Mrs Briggs, Ma’am—I’m sorry about all this.’

‘Here’s one that really didn’t know,’ said Mary, to me, putting a hand on his wrist. ‘When you reveal all to Captain Briggs, that at least will be true.’

‘Get below,’ he said, sharply. ‘And you two men, to work!’ But he looked into my face. ‘You’re not well. Volkert, send the boy up with a mug of hot cocoa for Mrs Briggs, with two spoons of sugar in it.’ He put his hand to my elbow and steered me towards the deck rail and stood there with me, quietly. ‘When you feel ready,’ he said, ‘tell me what you know.’

I don’t know how long I stood there with him, staring down at the white frill of the water lapping at the curve of the hull below me; half fainting, I think, now that the immediate terror and strain had been lifted. The steward came up with a tin mug of steaming hot chocolate. I recoiled from it and yet when I had drunk a little, it revived me. I lifted my eyes to Richardson’s face. I said: ‘What am I to do?’

‘I don’t know myself what to do,’ he said. ‘I didn’t find her till yesterday. To tell the Captain or not to tell him? But...’ He looked away, he flushed as I had seen him flush that day when he stood with my husband on the waterfront and Honey Mary came up to them there. ‘It’s difficult for me. If Cap’n Briggs knew...’

If you knew, I thought. Was it possible that he had seen that name written up on the ship and had no inkling of the truth? But I remembered how she had glanced at me as though to warn me to make no reference to my husband’s

weaknesses; I could know nothing then, of course, of her bet with Captain Morehouse or of any arrangements planned between them. I said, 'Of course he must be told.'

'I suppose so. And yet... If it need never be known? They could get her ashore in Portugal, we first dock there, and she could find another ship back to New York, or go what way she would.'

I grasped at some word, any word, of positive direction. 'I could find money for her.'

'Never fear, she'll find money enough for herself,' he said grimly. 'With such a head of hair, she'll never go short of gold.'

And yet I felt troubled for her, little idiot that I was. It was inconceivable to me that any woman should be all on her own. 'But in a strange land—'

He gave me a look of a sort of indulgent compassion, lifted up my hand from the rail and for a moment I thought he would have kissed it; but he only held it warmly for a moment in his own. Rough and crude he might be, but he was a kindly man. 'You have too vulnerable a heart,' he said, 'if it's to be at the mercy of such as Mary Sellers.'

I knew that she was bad, wicked, revelling in her wickedness, was all that my father, no less than my husband, would condemn to perdition. Her way of life was beyond my comprehension, her way with men was in my eyes detestable. And yet... Living in my tense inner world of insecurity and fear, her freedom, unconvention, all her carefree courage—were somehow irresistible. Besides, there was that sweetness in her; she could be pitying and kind. I think perhaps, even now, that Honey Mary with a single careless glance saw deeper into my quivering heart, than any who knew me much better than *she* could. I might have said something of this—though nothing about myself—had

not there come a sound and my husband stepped out of the afterdeck companion-way and came towards us. He walked very erect and firm, always, with only the little roll that all sailors have by habit, as though even on dry land their ship moved beneath them. He said sharply: 'What are you doing here? Why did you leave the cabin?'

I felt the little recoil and shock of ever present dread, I knew that my face lost colour and went stiff. I said: 'I needed some air.'

'There is air at the stern of the ship,' he said, 'without coming forrad to look for it,' and to Richardson: 'And you, what are you about?' and he looked up into the rigging and remarked some trouble with the sails, I don't know what, I knew nothing about all that. Having spoken; he ignored me. Richardson said, 'Ay, ay, sir,' and made me a small, ducking movement, excusing himself from my presence, and left us. My husband continued to stand at the deck rail looking about the ship, searching out the smallest faults, as was his way. As he took no further notice of me, I left him and creeping back along the deck plunged down to our quarters like a white rabbit scuttling into its burrow out of harm's way. My mirror told me how pale indeed I was, and I slapped at my cheeks to bring back some colour; my hair had been blown in the salt breeze and I unbound it and let it fall into its straight veil of auburn about my face, and only as I stranded it and bound and pinned the pale bands about my head, found how my hands trembled.

The cabin was strangely comfortless with its two hard wooden swivel chairs, in their fixed positions. I took my pillow from the wide bunk and placed it against the wall and there curled up and tried to force my quailing mind into some sort of order. And yet, poor child—what had it all to do with me? In the whole shocking business, I alone was

totally innocent; I had but to say to my husband, 'I have seen that woman, Mary Sellers, she's hidden aboard.' But then—who had first brought her aboard?—and so, with one small spark of compassion ignited a conflagration which, though I could not know it then, was to consume us all.

When my husband returned to the cabin, I had made up my mind. I would take my small courage into my hands and tell him simply that the woman was there, was said to have smuggled herself aboard without the knowledge of the crew, a stowaway: the woman whom I myself had introduced to the ship in compassion for her sorrows, whom I'd seen weeping down on the dockside; whom he'd undertaken to exhort to repentance. I would say no more and seem to know no more than this; would only make it as easy for him as was possible to me, would tell him what the mate, Richardson, had suggested...

... and my mind dreamed off, I saw Richardson's hand lift my own small tensed hand from the rail of the deck and hold it, comforting; saw how handsome he was with smooth brown, beardless face and how kindly he looked down at me and said that my heart was 'too vulnerable'... Was my heart vulnerable? If I had met this man before I had known my husband, if I had found someone understanding and kind...? And handsome... I fell into the old dreaming, the old retreat from reality; and in my dreaming mind, that kindly face with its simple good looks grew to be beautiful, I saw him bathed in some sort of light, a guardian angel of goodness, Gabriel, sword in hand, fighting off my terrors, his free arm about me gathering me into the warmth and brightness of that aura that shone all about him—

And my husband's voice, almost shouting at me: 'I'm asking you, what are you doing there?'

I violently started, cowering away from him into the

corner of the bed. ‘What are you doing on the bunk?’ he said. ‘Why are you crouching there, who has been here?’

I said to him stupidly: ‘Been here? Who could be here?’

He stood before me, foursquare, and his dark eyes, usually so cold and stern, were bright now with a blaze of absolute fury. ‘Why are you on the bed?’

I said helplessly, ‘The chairs are uncomfortable.’

He seemed to relax, his shoulders sagged, it was as if some inner rage had blown up and expanded him and now escaped, leaving a sagging balloon. He said, more quietly, ‘Get up. Get off the bed. The chairs are for sitting in. The bed is for lying in.’

For vileness, I thought, and filth. For cruelty. Chairs are for sitting in—a bed means only a man with a woman. I crawled to the end of it and crept past him and, exhausted, flopped down in a chair. He seemed about to say more but he desisted. I tried to recall all I had meant to confide to him, but I was wordless. I sat there, trembling. He said at last: ‘Remain in the cabin. Occupy yourself,’ and turned and went out again.

I am a dreamer, there is no guardian angel, no fine young man, beautiful and kind. I am a figurehead with the wild waves dashing up across my painted face; and no heart to break...

When he came back to the cabin, his mood had changed entirely. He sat down in the other of the two swivel chairs and pulled off his soft deck shoes. I moved forward to help him, but he said quietly, ‘Stay there.’ He got up again and padded across to the chest, disposed his shoes there neatly, hung up his jacket and peaked cap—came back to his chair and again faced me. He said: ‘Have you reason to suppose that you’re with child?’

‘With child?’ I said, astonished; startled at the mere

thought of it. 'No—no, why should I be?'

'Why, then, in the middle of the day do you go to your bed?'

I lifted up my hands in bewilderment. 'These chairs... Simply that the chairs are uncomfortable. I was tired, I took a pillow and sat on the bed—'

'Why should you be tired?'

This, I suppose, was the moment to have told him. I am worn out, exhausted by the shock of my discovery, by my anxiety for *you*. I wish only to protect you from distress and danger. But—nothing; only the painted face of the figurehead stared back at him. I felt no fear now, neither for him nor for myself, the sudden great upsurge of the waves had left me bereft of emotion, a nothingness. 'I was tired,' I repeated. 'That's all. The life is new to me, it's all new to me...' And you are new to me, I might have said, and the nights of dread. 'In future, I'll sit on a chair,' I said, tonelessly.

'Come, Sarah,' he said, and leaned forward and took my lax hand in his own, 'don't look like that. I didn't mean to distress you. I was shocked into imagining... After what I'd seen For once he failed in his usual incisive fluency. 'I was shaken into thinking perhaps you might be pregnant with a child.'

'Would that have been a sin also?' I said, wearily. I don't know where I found the courage to say it; but in fact, it was not a matter of courage, only of that woodenness of the painted woman with no heart to break.

'A sin?' he said. 'A sin to have a child? Your husband's child!' He had dropped my hand but he took it again in both his, leaning forward in his chair. 'Don't you wish for a child, Sarah? You would like to have children?'

'I don't care,' I said. 'I suppose I shall, anyway.'

‘Not care? But every woman wants children.’ His eyes went to the bed again, he said, ‘You’re not ill?’

‘I’m not ill,’ I said, woodenly, ‘and I’m not with child, and in future I’ll sit in a chair.’

He had let go my hands, now he sat back, looking into my face. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I was too severe with you, I’ve shocked you. It’s true, I’m not used to the feelings of young girls, at sea we men grow rough and unthinking. It’s a hard life and we know nothing else from our childhood.’ And quietly, reasonably, he began to speak of his own childhood on the waterfronts of Massachusetts that I myself knew well enough, where every man jack was connected with the sea and with sailing ships, with no other thought but becoming a seaman; of the bitter hard-working conditions thirty years ago when, a child of eight, he had first gone aboard to run errands for ships in port; of the first great voyage undertaken with such high hopes, ending two years later in the return, half broken by the work and savage treatment, at the age of sixteen a hardened man... Of the squalor and disease, the injury—I myself must, through my father, have heard of the poverty and distress in families where a man through all too frequent accident, lost all ability to work... ‘There was no room in those days for the helpless and useless.’

‘Any more than there is now,’ I said, inward looking. I was ungrateful for not since our courting days had I known him so kindly and agreeable. He could be so; with my parents he had been very friendly, courteous and in conversation informative and interesting. All he knew was the sea, but of the sea he knew everything there was to be known and spoke of it with intelligence, humanity and much insight into the nature, at least of men. He was as I’ve said in fact my cousin, I had known of him all my life, but

he was twenty years my senior and almost always away at sea. To my father, however, who knew in what high esteem he was held, for goodness and Godliness, he was a man to whose care I might be entrusted without a qualm. In my presence, alone with me, his manner had changed, but I think now, looking back, that he was sick with the physical side of his desire for me and could not be natural. Why he chose me I shall never understand. He wished for a wife, those physical desires of his must at last have outlet, his life had been one of abstinence, he could bear it no more. And here was my busy, bustling, competent family, and among them one who seemed docile and biddable—and desirable. Above all, I came, to his long knowledge of them, of Godly and virtuous people, I would worship with him—worship those two gods of his, the God above him and the god within him, who was himself. So, alone with me, his passions yet held in rein, he was sick with longing for me, and once those passions had been assuaged, sick with shame for the shock and violence of the assuaging. From the time of our marriage I had seen little of the man my parents knew—whom all the little town of Marion knew, and all the Massachusetts waterfront and the waterfronts of the world. But now that that man for a little while made his reappearance and conversed with me as though I were a friend, a companion, one who might even sit in the daytime on a bed, without rousing the most violent of nameless suspicions—it was too late. The painted lips of the figurehead opened only to spew back a mouthful of the salt sea.

He would not be defeated. He said: 'God has given you gifts. You have only to learn. You have only to try.'

'I've given up trying,' I said. 'No one lets me succeed.'

'That's nonsense,' he said, still kindly. 'You can't think

that you always fail.'

'I didn't say that I failed,' I said. 'I said I wasn't allowed to succeed.'

'But I *wish* you to succeed.'

'Then it was you who failed today,' I said, 'when I made my poor attempt to show the boy how to make a few vegetables just eatable.'

'That's the cook's business, Sarah,' he protested, but gently. I only said drearily, 'Then in future I'll mind my own, as you told me to do,' and added: 'You see, I *can* learn, if I'm taught my lessons forcibly enough.'

That night in the double bunk he merely kissed my forehead and turned away from me and for once I might have slept; but the life-blood was ebbing back into my petrified heart and my mind a turmoil of dread at what must come. For still no word had been spoken of Honey Mary's presence aboard the *Mary Celeste*.

CHAPTER VI

I WAS YOUNG, RESILIENT, I suppose—a night of peace brought me refreshment and a new hope. I look back and think that with all my frailties, there was within me always this rather touching courage, this squaring of the shoulders, putting aside of my insecurities and stepping forward again with a new optimism into the path of life—knowing in my heart that it would turn like the way of Hans Andersen's mermaid to knives beneath my tender feet. My husband was dressed and gone—for once without awakening me; and I rose and washed and dressed, all the time thinking what I had best do next. I had had made, especially for shipboard, a dress of a deep blue cloth, not navy, but a sort of deep moonlight blue, with a white frill at the neck and two bands of white braid running across the bosom and over the tops of the sleeves; the sleeves full, caught into narrow wrist-bands, the waist small and belted, the skirt very full. I had fitted myself with soft deck shoes and my mother's wedding gift had been a great shawl of softly woven wool, not brilliantly coloured as Mary's was, but with a sort of warm all-over sheen of silvery grey. I wrapped it now about me and went up on deck.

Now we were three full days out and well into the ocean, and the ship had begun her habitual gentle roll in seas more heavily rolling than those we had so far known. I staggered a little, holding on to the rail of the steep steps up to the deck, lifting my skirts to step over the high sill, almost lurching into a run as I made for the deck rail. Living in the state of Massachusetts, I was not unfamiliar with the ocean, I had as a child found my sea legs and learned that

the movement of a ship did not upset my stomach as it does with so many. If I now and again felt a little queasy, two or three deep breaths of the salty breeze restored me to normality. I remember that morning I wondered if the same would apply to Mary, whether all our troubles might not yet be saved by her being confined throughout a rough voyage to her bunk—some bunk, at any rate—with seasickness. I need not have troubled myself with hope: trust Mary to ride any storm as proudly as the ship itself, glorying in the lashing waves of high seas breaking over the decks, surging against the bare feet of the toiling men, crashing up against the sides of the deckhouse, soughing back again into the body of the ocean; rearing their white crests to dash themselves again against the vessel's sides. I too loved a storm, there was something in it that thrilled me to the soul: but Mary—she was a storm in herself, a storm within a storm, she rode with it, gloried in it as she gloried in all that was dangerous and wild. There can never have been any creature, so utterly without fear. I would have liked to go up into the forepeak—the expressions come back to me as I think over the long-ago days, but I daresay I get most of them wrong—and stand in the very prow where the great bowsprit thrust its length ahead of the body of the ship, over the curl of the water as the clean edge of the bows cleft its way through. Had we carried a figurehead, she would have lain along just beneath the bowsprit, chin thrust forward to meet the spray of those curling waters, but we carried none: I was the only figurehead aboard that ship, with my heart of bleeding wood. But my husband had said that I should remain aft; only, to stay there was to be under the scrutiny all the time of whichever of the men was taking his trick at the wheel, that's what they called it 'taking their trick'—or 'standing their trick', I never got these terms

right. It was Boz Lorenzen's brother, Volkert, this morning—Volk, they called him. Another of 'The Breughels'. He sketched me a vague salute and called, 'Morning, Ma'am!' I think that their original hostility had lain in their guilty knowledge that Honey Mary was aboard, that they had done me a wrong in bringing her there. Now that I knew the secret, they shrugged off the guilt, perhaps were even inclined to make up to me for it. At any rate, he touched the peak of his shabby black cap and called a greeting.

I picked up my skirts and stepped up the little ladder to the poop deck and remarked to him that now there was more of a swell than there had been so far. He said: 'You keep pretty gutt your legs.'

'I was brought up on the seaboard,' I said.

No doubt they were all in some anxiety as to what was to happen next. He wasted no more time. He said: 'Vot is mit Mary, Missis? You are not yet tellink de Master?' It must be obvious to him that the Captain knew nothing so far.

'I'm lost to know what to do about it, Volkert,' I said.

'He got to know.'

'He'll find out,' I said.

'Big troubles!'

'Why did you do such a foolish thing? You knew he'd find out and that there would be trouble.'

'Dronk!' he said, succinctly. I guessed that coming aboard such a ship as the Mary Celeste, they would all get drunk enough the night before she sailed, to last them for a few days at least, into the long grog-less voyage.

'And she tempted you?'

'Dis vicked von, she tempt de Archangel Gabriel himself.'

'But why does she want to come?'

He shrugged. 'For angry de Captain?'

‘Why should she want to make him angry?’

‘He make big preachings,’ he suggested, shrugging again. ‘Doing harm for Mary. De men is going off on long voyages, may be dangers, in spring Boz and I was in big dangers, big storm and wreck. Cap’n preaching they lose their souls if they going with such like Mary, they maybe going to their death this very voyage, don’t going aboard with sin on the soul. So instead, they getting dronk, too dronk for woman, Cap’n Briggs is turning blind eye to this if it keep them from woman.’ He laughed. ‘Som is paying friends keep sober and keep them from going with woman when they dronk, save their soul in case shipwreck and dangers. So Mary losing business.’ But he looked at me, sharply. ‘Not gutt talk for ladies like Mrs Briggs. I married, not gutt talk for mine wife.’

‘I know about Mary now,’ I said, ‘and it must be spoken of. I must protect my husband.’

He laughed again, and at least I saw that he had no suspicion that the kind of protection he supposed me to mean was too late. ‘Cap’n Briggs don’t need no protection, Ma’am, from Honey Mary. Very gutt man, very Got-fearing, big preaching, very strong. Besides...’ he added, with a little gesture. Besides, he meant, Captain Briggs had his own woman aboard. I could have told him: Yes, indeed!

‘I mean that this woman’s presence aboard his ship... She says she will spread it abroad that he brought her here.’

‘She iss a devil woman,’ he said, laughing. ‘Much mischief.’

I stood with my shawl hugged about me, the wind whipping my pale hair from its shining bands about my head, rocking a little, riding the movement of the ship as she sped with a following wind through the rolling grey-green waters. How vast it all was and how limitless! For a

moment the affairs of men seemed very petty and sordid against that expanse of glittering deep green.

They all moved so quietly about the ship, barefooted or in soft deck shoes except when the weather drove them to their heavy sea-boots, that often, with the sound in one's ears of the eternal swish and drag of the waves, the flapping of the sails, the creaking and groaning in the rigging, one did not hear their approach. I did not hear my husband now, only his voice calling to me sharply. I went down the steps, followed him along the deck to a place by the rail mid-way between the two upstanding roofs of the cabin quarters. He stopped there and faced me, almost hissing out at me: 'What are you doing, up there on the poop?'

'I was passing the time of day with Lorenzen,' I said; but recalling the subject of our conversation, I daresay that tell-tale colour of mine that came up so easily under my delicate skin, betrayed my unease.

'Are you to spend your whole time aboard, in vulgar gossip with my crew?'

'Gossip?—how could I gossip with them, what have I to gossip about?' Yet, exactly what had I been doing? 'I like to find out about the ship,' I said. 'I like to ask questions.'

'The person to answer questions about the ship is the Master,' he said. 'In future, confine your curiosity to my care.' His dark eye kindled, I think he would have spoken more angrily but that he remembered the violent scolding of yesterday; he had himself always under an iron control. I said: 'Am I never to speak to the men? I must converse with someone.'

'You can converse with your husband.'

It was on my tongue to reply that he never conversed with *me*, but I also must recall the previous afternoon and his efforts to make himself agreeable. I said, 'You are often

occupied

‘So are the men occupied,’ he said, ‘or would be if you wouldn’t keep interfering with their work. They should be keeping their minds on what they’re doing.’

‘Volk was just standing at the wheel,’ I protested. ‘It took no great effort of concentration.’

He glared at me, bright-eyed, fierce and frightening, with his black, jutting beard. ‘Get down to your quarters,’ he said, and would have turned and gone about his own duties but a flare of hot temper blazed up in me suddenly. I caught at him by the rough serge sleeve of his jacket. ‘Get to my quarters!—like a dog to its kennel? Am I to spend four weeks or more, cooped up down there?—you’ll put me on a chain, perhaps, with a heap of straw—but no, for I might lie down upon the straw and you not there to take advantage of it...’ I think that the colour flared up in his face, I know that it did in mine but I was lost suddenly to all but the injustice of it, the inhumanity of it. ‘I must breathe, I’m a living creature, I must sometimes breathe a little fresh air. If I go forward for it, you tell me to go back to the stern, if I go to the stern the men are there, am I to stand like a dumb fool if they wish me good morning—?’

‘Forrard,’ he said, coldly correcting me. ‘And you go aft or astern, not “to the stern”.’

I don’t know what anger had got into me that I blazed up again at the cold sarcasm of his voice. ‘So I fail again! I don’t know forrard from forward or stern from aft, and why?—because I’m not allowed to learn, because I can’t so much as exchange a greeting with those whose conversation would teach me these things. I shall go through a life of nothing but shipboard and at the end still not know forrard from forward because I must be chained in my kennel and have no chance to discover. And not having discovered, I’ll

be a fool, I'll have failed. And I *shall* have failed—because as usual no one will allow me to succeed...' He in turn caught at my arm, with a rough gesture commanding my silence lest his precious crew hear me raise my voice to him, I suppose, as none of *them* ever would have dared to do; but I tore myself from his grasp and ran, catching at the rail to steady myself, and climbed the tilting deck to the companion that led down to the main deckhouse, and half tumbled down the steps. Richardson was coming out of his cabin into the saloon and put out a hand to stop me from falling. I knew that my husband followed me and was within ear-shot. I said loud enough for him to hear: 'Don't touch me, you might find yourself bitten! I'm a half mad dog not safe to be let out of my kennel.'

My husband came down the companion-way after me. He said sharply to Richardson, 'Out!' and as the mate went off, looking back doubtfully, put a hand to my shoulder and I stumbled ahead of him into the cabin. I stood with my shoulders hunched, my back to him; his hand was raised, if I had turned to him, I think he could not have controlled himself from hitting me. But he only stood, rigid, and at last simply leaving me standing there, went out of the cabin. I heard his crisp step across the saloon and up the companion and the swish and bang of the door as it slid-to behind him. I knew better now than to fling myself across the bed, but I fell on my knees before one of the swivel chairs and put my head down on my arms and burst into a heartbreak of tears: and behind me a voice said, 'Poor little Sarah!' A woman's voice.

And she stood there, Honey Mary, in her scarlet dress, with her wild hair all about her beautiful face. I remained kneeling, staring up at her and jerked out at last, 'Go away,

he'll find you!'

She stood with her hands on her hips. 'What do *I* care for that?'

'If he finds you here with me—'

'Ah,' she said. 'That's different. Poor little Sarah!' And she stooped and took my arm and raised me up and almost tenderly, taking the handkerchief from my waistband, patted away the wet tears, with a gentle hand pushed aside the strands of my hair. 'There, my honey,' she said. 'No more tears!' And she shushed me like a child. 'Hush, now. Hush, now. Poor, frightened, bullied little girl

'I lost my temper,' I said.

'And magnificently! Though why should the mad dog bite poor Albert Richardson, he does you no harm, he thinks the whole world of you.'

'You heard me?' I stammered.

She gestured with her head to the saloon and the door of the chief mate's cabin. 'I lay very snug last night; poor Bert for very terror of discovery, dossing elsewhere, however—such a night of peace I haven't enjoyed for a long time.'

'You've been in Mr Richardson's cabin?'

'There's one place the master of a vessel respects. The chief mate is on a near equality. Captain Briggs knows his sea-going manners.'

But the fear was returning to me, blotting out all else. 'If he finds you in here—'

'Well, then, come in there and we'll talk.'

'No, no,' I protested, 'he would come back and find me —off my chain... He'd search the ship for me.'

'Well, he'll not return for a little while. Listen, you can hear his voice; having lost his temper for no reason, he'll be looking for a reason to have lost it.' And indeed, he could be

heard roaring furious instructions up to the rigging, where all had been peace and order till now. She looked round her. 'In case we should be caught—where could I hide?' There was a W.C. in the corner, with a curtain pulled across it. 'If the worst comes to the worst, I shall dodge in there.' And she laughed outright. 'A fine moment when he comes in, all unbreeched, to find a woman there already!'

'Mary,' I begged, 'please go—I dare not talk to you.' But I knew that here was my opportunity; to talk to her, to plead with her, to plan with her how my husband might be spared from the threat her presence posed for him. I begged: 'Don't let him find you! Go ashore when we reach land, I'll find money to help you, you shall have all I own, I have a pin with a pearl in it... Why should you wish to injure him?'

She sat down slowly in the chair, took my two hands in hers, sat there looking up at me. 'You still try to *protect* him?'

No other thought had come to me. I said stupidly: 'He's my husband.'

'Who treats you like a kennelled bitch. And ... I know how he uses you—a young creature, innocent, not a tough veteran like me. Why should you care for him?—let him be taught a lesson and he'll treat you very differently ever after, I'll promise you that. You'll have the whip hand then.'

My whole skin crawled with the terror of discovery, she sitting there so bold and careless, holding my hands in hers, as though she were my friend—a whore of the waterside. But my husband's voice could still be heard shouting directions. I whispered: 'What would you do?'

'Well...' She considered it, easily, swinging the swivelling chair a little bit this way and that, like a child. 'If none knew but you...'

'I know already,' I said, and felt the hot flush under my

skin.

That stopped the casual swing to and fro. 'He *told* you?' 'I saw his face when he came back from—from you.'

She shrugged. 'Anyway, I didn't mean that. What threat would that mean to him?—you'd never tell anyone, poor little mealy-mouthed girl, and if you did no one would believe you, they'd say you were jealous and without any reason...' She seemed not to think it disgusting and ludicrous that a married woman should be jealous of her husband's—filth—in the arms of such a woman as herself; and indeed... She wasn't like other such women, as I'd seen them down there on the quayside, she was not sluttish and vulgar, she was brilliant and beautiful, a queen. 'But...' She gave a little wriggle in the chair, her face took on that look of mischief—of wickedness really—and yet she had the magic of laughter to turn it into no worse than a mischievous naughtiness. She said: 'No one but these men know I'm here—seven of them, Richardson and Gilling, and the cookboy and the four Germans. They'll do what I tell them—or, when they come in to New York from their various voyages, how sorry they'll be! So that if none know but you and I and a handful of men who'll keep silent—what a threat you hold over him then! You have but to give the signal, and we shall have it spread over every waterfront on the trade routes, before the month is out—the great Captain Benjamin Briggs seduced, brought down by Honey Mary of the New York docks and smuggled aboard for his pleasure during the trip to Genoa and back—and with his innocent young wife aboard, the disgrace of it!' She clapped her white hands together, bending her face over them, alight with laughter. 'My honey, you have him by the short hairs! "Treat me fair, or I'll tell all! Do this, do that, do as I bid you—or I've but to say the word to my friends, and

they will tell all! It's only by my bidding that they haven't already.'" She caught at my hand again. 'And—"leave me in peace when I wish for peace—or I'll tell all."

I coloured again; so crude and outspoken! my 'friend'—a waterside harlot my 'friend', and a crew of men, rough and violent, uncontrolled and in their behaviour licentious—my 'friends'. And to be hand in glove with them, to make a pact with them... And against my own husband! 'But, Mary—' I began...

'No buts,' she said. 'It was for him to protect and cherish you and he does neither. Your life will be one of endless misery—Sarah, honey, I mean it!—unless you use this whip which God puts into your hand. You have but to tell him next time he offends you, "If you won't have more care for me, I shall tell all your secrets." No need to be rough about it, poor gentle little thing that you are. He seduced me—I seduced him, more like, to teach him a lesson, the tub-thumping hypocrite—'

I let that go by, I clutched at the word 'secrets'; I said urgently, 'The crew don't know about that?'

'They shall,' she said, as though it were a promise. 'I'd kept it to myself so far, for my own ends; a little blackmailing secret may come in handy any time. But I'll tell them now. Your hold over him would be nothing without that. He could always deny that he'd known of my coming aboard; the other he wouldn't deny—with all his faults, he couldn't lie, I think, and anyway his face would flame and go grey and flame again, he'd give himself away.' And suddenly her hand tightened on mine, 'He's coming!—and she was gone, a whirl of scarlet, out of the cabin, across the floor of the saloon—it was all a short enough distance in all conscience. I rushed after her but in time only to catch a glimpse of the door of the chief mate's cabin softly closing

and my husband's feet and legs appearing at the top of the companion-way. I dodged back into my own cabin and when he entered was sitting stiffly upright in one of the two chairs. I didn't wait to know his mood. Strong in my new strength, I said coldly: 'You find me sitting upright, as instructed. Breathing the nice, foetid cabin air, as instructed. In silence and alone—as instructed.'

He stopped dead in the doorway. I think he was utterly astonished, he had thought me a thing of whey as a wife should be, discounted my little uprush of pettishness, up on deck, earlier; now was astounded and perhaps perturbed by its persistence. He said: 'You are behaving like a silly child.'

'If one's treated like a silly child,' I said, 'that's the way one behaves. You told me to sit in a chair, to remain down here, to speak to no one...'

The steward came down the companion steps in the adjoining saloon, with a rattle of china and metal to lay the table for the midday meal. My husband closed the door behind himself and came forward into the cabin. 'I simply instruct you not to be familiar with the crew.'

'Who else is there to be familiar with?' I said. And I took a leaf out of Mary's wicked book of mischief. 'Or are there any ladies aboard, to be friends with me?'

'There'll be no ladies at all aboard on my next trip,' he said, 'if this is to be your behaviour.'

'If you mean you'll not take me with you,' I said, 'I can think of no greater blessing and no greater peace.'

He sat down slowly in the other chair, leaned his head for a moment in his hands, his elbows on the table. When he lifted his head again his face was very grim. 'Am I to understand, Mrs Briggs, that you are settling in to a married life of playing the termagant?'

'A chained dog will bark,' I said.

The sparks flew from his eyes, his black beard jutted fierce. ‘A dog may be beaten,’ he said. ‘A dog may be lashed into obedience.’

I had learned some lessons in the past half hour. ‘Will you lash me?’ I said. ‘Is it to be known about the waterfronts of the world that Captain Benjamin Briggs can’t keep his wife in order without physical violence? Because, Captain Briggs, lay one finger upon me, and I’ll see that it *is* so known. I swear that to you. And if you think I can’t—’

‘Your friends among my crew will work for you, no doubt?’ he said. ‘You waste very little time, Madam. I see now what you’re about.’

I could not reply; and my silence I think really stunned him, he recognised the impossible—that the threat I made, might really be carried out. He changed tack a little. He said slowly: ‘You’re not the girl I thought you to be when I married you.’

‘Nor you the man I thought you to be,’ I said, ‘when I married *you*. Nor the man my father thought you to be, either. He thought you a decent, good man who would care for his daughter not threaten, within a month of her marriage, to lash her like a dog. Not that my father would lash a dog. He has respect for all things weaker than himself.’

‘If you are weaker than I, Sarah,’ said my husband, ‘you give little evidence of it at this moment.’ And he turned away his head. He said, and I think that he meant it, he felt it in his soul: ‘You disgust me.’

I felt my heart tremble within me, I felt that I had been indeed rough and unwomanly, I felt that I had betrayed my marriage vows of obedience and cherishing. But I remembered Mary’s hand holding mine close in her own, I remembered the recognition that had come to so hardened

and experienced a woman, of my wrongs; 'I know how he uses you,' she had said, '—a young creature, innocent, not a tough veteran like me...' 'And you disgust *me*,' I said to my husband, 'and have from the first moment you laid your hands on me, an untouched, untutored girl. Sail without me,' I said triumphantly, 'leave your kennelled bitch behind! Some waterfront woman would serve you better than I can; and I daresay will.'

That terrible grey beneath the weather-beaten tan! The dark, bright eye growing dim with some hidden sickness within him, hands trembling... Who now was the cowering dog? He lumbered to his feet, turned and almost stumbled out of the room and I was left with my triumph alone.

Little Sarah Briggs, four weeks a bride, from a minister's home in a small town in Massachusetts—striking out, ugly and vicious at the man she had, four brief weeks ago, sworn to love, honour and obey. 'You disgust me,' he had said. And rightly, I thought. Who am I, who is this, who yaps and bites indeed like a cornered cur? If Captain Briggs had come back to his cabin in the next hour, he would have found his wife on her knees at the bedside, sick with repentance and shame, begging help from her God.

CHAPTER VII

MY FIRST THOUGHT WHEN I rose from my knees was that I must prevent Mary from revealing to the men the secret of my husband's seduction. The dinner hour was near; I had time only to scribble a note, 'I regret what we arranged. Tell no one the secret,' and even as I wrote I heard my husband and Gilling come down the companion, and had time to say no more. I had hoped that he might come into the cabin so that I could have had a private word with him, but he did not and when I came into the saloon, I saw that he had taken his place at the table; he did not meet my eye. I said to Gilling, 'May I have one second to speak to my husband in private?' He shrugged and, starting to whistle, moved away and leaned against the door of Richardson's cabin. I wondered if Mary were still in there; and he must have wondered too, or known that she was, for behind his back his fingers beat a soft little tattoo against the wood. I sat down in my corner place opposite my husband and said, very low: 'I want to tell you that I'm sorry.'

I think that a load fell away from him; he had been uncertain what he should do if I persisted in my rebellion. He said only, however, 'Very well.'

'I repent, I've said my prayers.'

'We will speak of it later,' he said, coldly, and gestured Gilling to come back to the table.

The old crushing defeat. I sat with hanging head, pushing about my plate the slosh of meat and vegetables, I felt unable to eat. 'What is the matter?' said my husband. 'Can't you eat your meal?'

'We've reverted to the way Mrs Briggs doesn't like it,'

said Gilling, with a sneer.

‘We’ve reverted to swill,’ said my husband. ‘And I don’t know which is worse.’

‘Mrs Briggs hasn’t cooked in a ship’s galley,’ said Gilling. ‘No doubt things are different in a fancy equipped kitchen in New England.

‘Time is the same anywhere,’ I said, resentfully. ‘The food is cooked for too long. However, don’t think I’m interfering again, because I’m not. Today, I am simply not hungry.’

I thought the mate looked a little surprised at this small show of spirit, but I did not care. All I wanted was to get the message to Mary before more mischief was done. When the meal was over, however, and the two men had left, the boy Tedhead remained, messing about in the pantry and then set about cleaning up the saloon. I didn’t know whether or not he would be aware of Mary’s hiding place in the cabin and dared not go to her; I must simply sit him out, I thought, and then go to the cabin. But before he had done, the man Martens came, another of the German seamen, and knocked at my door. ‘Message from Captain, Ma’am. Hammock has been slung for you amidships. If you wanting fresh air, you should going dere. Cap’n says, if you want reading, is book in table drawer. That’s message, Ma’am. So please to coming mit me and I showing you.’

There was nothing to do but to go with him. I fetched the Bible from the drawer and went up to the deck after him; and as I went, surreptitiously slipped the note I had scribbled, in through the slit of the sliding door of the first mate’s cabin. There was no sound from within.

So now instead of being chained to a chair in my cabin, I was chained to a hammock on the deck. I would not be

ungrateful, for here at least was the fresh salt air, and the sparkle and roll of the ocean, the restless, moving, swirling roll with its upflung white lace ruffles of spray. But, a girl brought up in the country, I longed for exercise, to pace the scrubbed decks with their dark lines of caulking, to revel in the easy balance with which I rocked a little with the rocking of the ship, to stand at the rail and look down sheer into the glassy depths. But I dared not. The brief walk from my tether in the cabin to my tether on the deck amidships was all I cared to risk. Nor was there any addition to my company; the men must have had a word spoken, for they would sketch a salute, civil enough, and simply pass by. And neither was a hammock even very comfortable; I thought that to lie in it would all too possibly be sinful luxury, and a hammock is a difficult thing to sit upright in. Exhausted with the efforts of the past two days, I summoned up a moment of secret amusement at the pass to which my one great outburst of rebellion had brought me. But I was too beaten in spirit even to dream; all my thoughts were concentrated on the effort to get Mary to alter her plan. I knew now that my only duty was to save my husband such trouble as might face him and I was sick with dismay at the depths I had sunk to, in the falling away from those duties I had so lately and freely taken on.

The next morning passed, a meal hardly edible, the early part of the afternoon. No sign of Mary; no speech with any of the crew. I grew desperate. But at last Albert Richardson came from the afterdeck and approached my half-hidden lair as though to address me. I could not forbear from saying, 'You're not actually about to speak to me, Mr Richardson?'

'I have the Cap'n's permission, Ma'am,' he said, 'if I have yours.' He put on a voice of some solemnity. 'Captain

Briggs thinks it not proper for the Master's lady to be too familiar with the crew. But the first mate's an exception in several matters and this seems to be one of them. Besides, I have the advantage of being a married man.' He ducked me a comic little bow and with evident difficulty smothered a grin.

I had not realised he was married and I thought back with a vague shame on that dream of the Archangel Gabriel holding me guarded close, in his encircling arm. 'I didn't know you were married, Mr Richardson. Is your wife in New York?'

He flushed and I knew why. 'Well, no, Ma'am, she lives with her parents in Nova Scotia when I'm at sea.' He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down at me, swaying a little to balance himself against the motion of the ship, and broke into desultory conversation; but both of us I think, were conscious only of Mary Sellers in the background and of the question she posed, and I was sick with anxiety to know whether or not she had as yet revealed my husband's secret. I brought the conversation round without too much difficulty to the subject of the ship —and so to her rechristening. 'She was built near your wife's home, then?'

'Yes, Frances remembers her launching, ten years ago. They called her the Amazon then.'

'Captain Briggs didn't care for the name? He's never told me,' I said carelessly, 'why he chose the one he did.'

He balanced back and forth on toes and heels, looking somewhat uncomfortable. 'I think that... Mary Sellers came up to him on the quay, Ma'am, while we were painting out the old name and I think she teased him into this one from some fancy of her own.' To my utter relief he said, and I thought with sincerity: 'She's a creature of mischief. To be

seen with her anywhere near him was an agony to so widely respected a man as Captain Briggs. I think she stung him like a gadfly with her presence until he gave way—just to be rid of her.'

So Mary had not spoken out yet: for he above all would have known. I suggested, testing him: 'She could tell ugly tales.'

'No one would believe anything like that of Captain Briggs,' he said immediately, 'but she could embarrass him; her presence hanging on his arm—however unwilling he might be—couldn't be explained away when all men saw it. So he'd promise her anything to get her to be gone.' He shrugged. 'He's not a man to care much what a ship is called.'

Enormously relieved, I turned the subject a little. 'We, however, can't tell her to begone. Not till we reach land. Meanwhile, what are we to do?'

'You know where we keep her concealed?'

'I'm very anxious to speak to her,' I said. At his questioning look, I amended: 'She's—kind. I think she doesn't want to hurt *me*; only to tease him, because he—preaches against her and her kind. I think that I could persuade her to keep her presence secret and go ashore when we touch land. But I must talk with her myself. She's not always in your cabin; I've tried a couple of times when the saloon's been empty.'

He went red again. 'She moves about. She has—debts to pay.'

I think that in a way, in those days I really almost loved her; it came as a shock when I was brought up short against the ugly facts of her life. Debts to pay! As the price of a piece of mischief, getting smuggled aboard to tease and torment one man, she would lie with half a dozen others,

with such as the half-witted cookboy and the Lorenzen brothers... I said stiffly: 'If you can speak to her, tell her that I must see her. I wrote her a note

My husband approached along the deck. He had not spoken a word to me since the previous evening. Now he seemed to force himself to an appearance of normality. He said: 'Well—you two have been conversing—?'

'Mr Richardson has been telling me about his wife,' I said. 'She comes from Nova Scotia, she remembers the launching of this very ship...'

For some reason he seemed annoyed; perhaps because the change in the ship's name brought him uncomfortable memories. 'Yes, well, very well,' he said. 'I'm glad you've had a pleasant conversation. And now, if I give you my arm, perhaps you'd like some exercise around the deck?'

A girl of eighteen—to be assisted like an infirm old woman as she walked the two sides of a deck measuring a hundred foot overall! I rose obediently and wrapping my silvery shawl about me, primly tucked my hand into his arm, opening out like the wing of a chicken to receive it and closing over it again. We set off soberly enough; I subdued my country-girl stride and he no doubt was curbing his own quick, brisk step to accommodate the acceptable pace for a woman. As we went, he began a sort of questioning; for some reason not entirely agreeably. He asked me, had Richardson children? I said no, apparently none; his wife lived with her family. What did her family consist of? I had no idea, I knew only that her name was Frances. Was his own family living? I didn't know. 'He was a long time telling you,' he suggested dryly, 'that his wife's name is Frances, he has no children and she lives in Nova Scotia.'

I thought of the real purport of our conversation and felt my hand tauten involuntarily on his arm. I forced

myself to relaxation. ‘And she remembers the launching of the original Mary Celeste!’

He also seemed to relax. ‘She saw a very different ship in those days,’ he said, more conversationally. ‘The brig had then only the one deck...’ And as though bent upon finding some common ground with me, he began to speak again of the sea and ships, instructing me, pointing out the changes that had been made in the brig, the increase in her length and tonnage, her past history which had been none of the happiest—on her very first voyage her master had taken ill and subsequently died, she had ended up at last a wreck in the gales at the mouth of the Gulf of St Lawrence. ‘She fell upon hard times. A ship, you know, to us seamen is like a human being—’

‘Oh, yes,’ I said, ‘I understand that, I’ve seen the men at home, they look upon their ships almost as women, as though they had hearts and souls of their own, to be considered and cared for—’

‘A ship cannot have a soul,’ he said, austerely interrupting. ‘The soul belongs to God.’

I was thrown back, out of my foolish eagerness. ‘Well, no, of course. I just meant—’

‘It’s true that men think of this ship or that as though she had a very heart,’ he said, continuing on his own way. ‘Or at least a personality of her own which must be respected and deferred to. When my company took over this brig, she had lost her self-respect. We restored that to her, we renewed her pride in herself, we gave her a new dress—’

‘And a new name,’ I suggested, and wondered if I should ever learn to keep my stupid mouth closed. But I slid it all into easiness, and I think made the transfer very well. ‘It was an inspiration, taking away the bold Amazon image and giving her a soft womanish name, a whole new change

of identity.'

He caught at it, thankfully I think; and for a long time he walked with me there, talking agreeably as he had talked two evenings before, as he had conversed with my parents in those happier days and won their respect and mine with it. I suppose I had never loved him; to be respectably married, to be provided for and cared for, to perform one's wifely duties in return—this was the be-all and end-all of a girl's existence in those days and I had thought, poor child, that I might have a better chance of self-fulfilment away from the repressions of home. I had been filled with thankfulness and relief at his coming; I had looked no further. Now however as he walked and talked with me for the first time in our lives, freed of that inner pressure, I was filled with yet another new hope. In that foolish way of mine, I thrust behind me all the terrors and cares, I looked to some dream magic to invest me at last with practicality and good sense, I chatted away with eager freedom, asking my artless questions, trying to take in the explanations and answers, trying to learn something for a change. When the boy came to say in his cloddish way that the meal was on the table, I felt that for years I had not known such faith and confidence in myself.

We were well out into the Atlantic now and the ocean had taken on that impression of a boundlessness that to this hour haunts my dreams—as though nothing existed in the wide world but the waste of the rolling sea streaked with white foam, restless, restless, an infinity of heaving grey-green molten glass. The ship rolled with the rolling of the waves as, with a hiss and a rush and a slap, slap, slap of wet hands against her hull, a speck in infinity, she cut her way through. I climbed up the tilt of the deck to the sliding door

of the companion-way, my husband's hand flat against my shoulder supporting me, bent my head to the low doorway, stepping hunched, over the high brass-topped sill and staggering a little, got down the steps and into the saloon. Richardson, waiting for us there, turned his eyes meaningfully to the door of his cabin and hastily averted them as my husband followed me down. He asked, as though the glance were connected with the question, did the captain intend, as he'd said, to take a trick at the wheel himself, after the meal? Two of the men, it seemed, were unwell, they were short of crew...

'Of course,' said my husband. 'If I say a thing, I mean it,' and as soon as dinner was over, went up on deck to relieve the helmsman. Richardson mouthed at me the words, 'One—hour—at—least,' and went up after him.

I waited till the steward was out of the way at last and went and tapped softly at the door. Mary opened it and, smiling, full of fun as though we were two schoolgirls, hiding away to share a stolen apple, took my arm and almost yanked me inside. I was terrified, nevertheless. 'We're all right,' she said. 'The men are pretending to be sick to give us an hour or two free, I must speak with another woman or die! He'll stay at the wheel, you know he will; probably throughout the whole watch, and Albert's above and will stamp on the deck if trouble approaches.' She laughed. 'Come, let's settle down and talk.'

The cabin was no more than a cupboard, how the men lived kennelled up like dogs for the weeks and months at sea I don't know; though heaven knows, my own was not too large. But this was no more than the length of the wooden bunk against its outer wall, with a chest across one end between the top of the bunk and the inner wall, leaving when the door was closed-to, hardly room for us two to

stand, our heavy skirts, much stuffed out by their petticoats, crushed close together. She climbed up on to the bunk and crawling along it, curled herself up in the far corner. I hoisted myself up to sit on the remaining space, feet dangling, facing the door, all ready for flight. ‘Now, come,’ she said, ‘what was this foolish note pushed through the crack? What of all our fine plans for the fall of the Mighty?’

‘I regret it all, Mary,’ I said. ‘When you left me, I prayed. I’d be wrong to betray my husband.’

‘No one asks you to betray him, little idiot! Only to hold the threat above his head that you *might* betray him—so that you’re safe from his bullying.’

I knew that I blushed but I persisted: ‘A man has—rights—over his wife. It’s for his wife to submit.’

She wore today a dress of brilliant green, like the heart of an emerald, heavily scrolled at its hem with white braid—it was ever her habit to pick out one or another colour from the Paisley pattern of her shawl, accent it in her gown and then, as though it were her very signature scrawled about the gown, decorate it with white braid. Beneath the gown was always a froth of petticoats, holding out the skirts to a heavy fullness but edged with lace and frills—my own petticoats were of good white flannel, one upon the other for warmth and decency, but with no more than a little decorative feather-stitching and perhaps some scalloping: my sisters had sat and grudgingly stitched at my modest little trousseau, suitable for a life at sea and as the wife of a sober and respectable man. But Honey Mary! How she had smuggled all these clothes aboard, heaven knew; nor how she kept all the whiteness so brilliantly white could I ever understand; but for all her way of life, no one I ever saw had such a look of health and strength and—cleanliness. Her skin was always clear, eyes bright, hair shining with

washing and brushing and under the brilliant gowns with their stark white braiding, her petticoats blue-white and always as though they had been freshly starched; and her bodices... Well, one saw quite enough of *them*, the crisp, laundered lace threaded through with ribbons to match her gowns, frilled over her golden bosom. A time was to come when she would look less than perfectly groomed to the last miracle of perfection; but till that time, she might at any moment of her life have just stepped out of the hands of a lady's maid. And always she wore a perfume of her own. If one could say that she smelt of the honey of her nickname—then she smelt of honey.

She sat curled up, her arms about her knees, the mass of frilled petticoats frothing like sea-foam about her pretty little lace-up boots—any costume less suited for wear on shipboard could hardly be imagined. ‘But, my honey,’ she said, as though in refusing to betray my husband after all, I spoilt some gleeful childish game, ‘our plan!’

‘Our plan was that you should tell the men of my husband’s—wrong conduct with you, Mary; so that if he failed to please me, I could hold it as a threat over him, that you and they would spread his shame abroad. But—’

‘Failed to please you!’ she said. ‘He treats you by day like a kennelled bitch; and by night—’

I said confused and embarrassed, ‘In that I think he—can’t help himself. He has strong passions—’

‘Then let him wreak them on the likes of me,’ she said, ‘and not on a cringing, innocent little girl like you.’

‘He’s a normal man,’ I said. ‘It’s not his fault if I came to him—unprepared.’

‘No, my honey,’ she said. ‘He is not a normal man. I know something about men and you do not. He is a normal man in the one sense, but in the other, his passions are not

what you, in your innocence, call strong, but very violent, very uncontrolled, with a violence and uncontrol that could very soon turn to actual brutality

‘I know all this,’ I said. ‘But surely it’s between himself and his God? It’s not for me to punish him.’

‘I don’t ask you to punish him,’ she said. ‘What would *you* punish him for? Many women would—’ I thought she was about to say something more positive, and I believe now with hindsight that I was right; but she said, instead, ‘Some women would accept, would not object. He’s no monster, he’s just—less controlled than many men. But this is not for you to endure; you should protect yourself.’

‘If I’m patient...’ And I implored her: ‘Do nothing! I’ll accept what I must and—you’ve given me strength, Mary, just by talking to you I’ve gained understanding and strength. I’ve spoken back, I’ve argued my case with him. You see now that I’ve got a corner of my own up on deck. And the rest I begin better to understand and therefore I can deal with it. I came to him—to marriage—so entirely unprepared. My father’s a minister, very good, but very—high-minded, he would never speak of such things; and my mother... She’s a simple woman, occupied with the house; she has little time for silly shrinking violets, stupid and vague, not taking in what they’re told.’

She looked at me pityingly, curled up in her corner there. ‘And what *were* you told?’

‘Well, that I should...’ Up came the flush of colour again. ‘That my—my nightdress would be disarranged, that I wouldn’t understand but I must accept as—right, whatever my husband should do because—men understood these matters and women did not but it was necessary so that one might bear children.’

‘Not a word to suggest that *you* might find some delight

in such embraces?’

‘Oh, Mary!’ I said. ‘How could one?’ And yet... I had known that she herself had taken pleasure in my husband’s arms as well as giving it.

She reached out and took my hand and held it in her own, laying her warm cheek for a moment against the curl of my fingers. ‘Poor little Sarah! What’s right for a man—may that not be right for a woman also? In your eyes, Sarah, I’m a bad woman, I know, because I love with men I’m not married to—’

‘Love?’ I cried. ‘Do you call that love?’

‘Yes, I do call it love,’ she said. ‘I lie with no man I can’t at least a little, and for a little while, love. Others do—others have to and perhaps I may one day come to that—that I must offer myself to any low creature who approaches me, simply for my bread—’

‘You told me when first I talked to you that that was what you must do. I saw you go up to a man and actually ask him for food. And then you went with him

She laughed, biting her lip in a sort of self-reproach. ‘Poor little one, don’t you know yet that that was all a game? I made a bet with Davey Morehouse of the Dei Gratia that I would entrap your husband—and the wager was this gold cross that your husband gave back to me when at last I had him, sick with desire for me, flinging himself on my body. And indeed I tell a story when I say that I go with no man I can’t like, for I can’t like *him*, sanctimonious, preaching, self-deceiving prig that he is, and yet I lay with him. But that was not for money; that was for fun, to win my bet with Davey. And Davey—now there’s a man! Do you know, Sarah, that the very first man in my life was a man just like Davey Morehouse—ten long years ago!’

‘Ten years... But, Mary—’

'I was fifteen,' she said, shrugging, with that teasing, provocative grin of hers. 'Does that shock you? But my parents weren't like yours, my dear, a simple woman and a good man. My mother was a woman of marvellous beauty and my father adored and desired her I think every moment of his waking life; and she would tease him, denying him until at last he actually took up a stick to her...'

'He *beat* her? Your father beat your mother?'

'We weren't people like you, Sarah, honey. We were people of the waterfront, my mother kept lodgings for sailors and only that she was so beautiful, I suppose would have been as low and bedraggled as the rest of her kind. But she *was* beautiful, she kept herself clean and fastidious and my father with his stick kept off all those who might have injured her; he fought her and fought for her and fought over her, and for all her taunting and teasing, she was like an angel in his sight. It astounded me that she could treat him so, how she could deny him when he was so fine, so handsome and so desirable; and so fierce and strong with that great mermaid stick of his. It was a stick that he had brought back from some foreign travel, very heavy, with the head carved into the body of a mermaiden, the tail, sharp-divided, curving round the first length of the stick, and all polished to a glowing gold. A vicious bitch she was too, that mermaid of his and with a taste for blood! Many a scalp I've seen, split and bleeding, by her sharp, cutting tail and her blunted head...'

I think we had both forgotten where we were, had forgotten the close little cabin and the pad of men's bare feet on the deck just above our heads, the flap of the sails, the creak of the rigging, the slap, slap, slap of water against the skimming hull: the monotonous clanging of the clapper against the inside of the bell that marked the passing of the

watch. She was far away in the scenes of her childhood, the clapboard house, painted black I daresay, down there close to the docksides, the neat interior, the beautiful woman and the man so fierce and strong, keeping off the other dogs from his bitch with his blood-stained stick. She had let go my hand, her own were clasped in the lap of the brilliant green gown as she sat curled up in her corner with the great amber eyes looking back into that not so distant past. ‘It amazed me,’ she said, ‘that she could refuse him. If I had not been his daughter... But I *was* his daughter; and I could only look on, sick with the guilty longing to be in her place, beaten with that great stick into subjection.’

I was horrified, dumbfounded; bewildered. Actually to desire such things... Actually to envy another woman. And your own mother—with your own father... To be beaten... She must have seen my face for she came back to the present. ‘Oh, poor little Sarah, I shock you! But never fear, my love, I soon sought a way out and it wasn’t far to search for. I told you that my mother took in sailors as lodgers.’ She laughed, shaking her head at those memories. ‘What a girl! That night! The first night of love in all my life—and what a night of loving! He couldn’t believe I was not long practised in the arts. A natural born whore he called me, and “my honey harlot” he christened me and honey indeed it was to me. From that day forward I need envy no woman, not even my own mother with my father.’

‘At fifteen years of age?’

She shrugged. ‘Long before I was sixteen, my child, I was known to any man along the waterfront that caught my fancy. And being paid for my pleasure.’

‘But your parents—?’

‘Ah, my parents!—the cause of all the trouble, as I suppose you would call it, though indeed I’ve hardly known

an unhappy hour, it's one round of pleasure. Well—my father thought of no one but my mother; if I cared to dispose of myself elsewhere, I think he hardly noticed it. But my mother—the whore of all time if he hadn't kept her in subjection with that stick of his!—she chose to be shocked and disgusted, and duly threw me out to where I might become more shocking and disgusting still!' The great eyes looked again back into the past. 'I daresay she envied me my freedom. All those men coming and going and she not allowed to lay her witching hands on them—and I could take them, one after another, to my adolescent bed! So—she had bequeathed to me her honey hair and her honey body and her taste for honey, and that was all I ever had from her. As I say, before I was sixteen...' But she suddenly raised her head. 'That bell again! How many strikes is that? He may not take the full watch.'

All that precious time together—and what had I done with it? Listened like a child consumed with salacious curiosity, to the horrifying history of a woman of the streets—I, the child of a minister, from my busy, pious, innocent home!—and said hardly one word to advance the cause I had come to plead with her. I said to her now, terrified: 'I must go; but, Mary—have you promised me? You'll say nothing to the men, you won't tell them of his downfall—?'

'You speak very slightly of the conquest of my charms,' she said, but she was teasing.

'Oh, Mary, don't laugh! It's of such deathly importance. Don't let the men know what happened! And never let him know that you're aboard. We'll help you home to New York, Richardson will help me, you shall have all I possess. If nobody knows about—about you, Mary, about you and him —then if anything comes out later as to your having been aboard, no one will believe that he had any knowledge of it,

and he's saved. His name, his great name, his reputation—he could never show his face along the waterfronts again

‘What do I care?’ she said. ‘He sails under false colours. He condemns men for so-called sins, which he himself commits.’

‘One sin—I think it has been only the once, that time with you.’

She thought it over. ‘Well—you may be right. Once in a very long while, anyway. He's been with a harlot before, but maybe only in his youth.’

‘But now he's so highly thought of, he thinks of himself as so high. If others knew—how could he face them? He's taught them to think of him—he thinks of himself—as a very god of respectability—’

‘A respectable god,’ she said, still laughing. ‘Is that his idea of the Almighty Creator?’

‘Well, what matter? It's out of his own guilt that he creates this image, Mary; because he can't face it, he pretends to himself that he's not as other men. He knows; but he pretends. It's like a child, it's pathetic, and as his wife, I must try to understand, I must protect him from himself, I must support him

‘But I need not,’ she said. She looked her contempt. ‘I don't care for pathetic men.’

‘It's what I beg of you. I ask you, of your goodness—’

She interrupted again. ‘My goodness? Oh, little Sarah—do you use that word in connection with such as I?’

‘You're kind, Mary; that's goodness. Be kind to me?’

‘But you want me to be kind to *him*. And I dislike and despise him; I care nothing for his aspirations to a false respectability.’

‘Then if you care nothing, why will you persist?’ Now I was aware indeed of the padding feet on the deck above, of

the tiny cabin where I hid from my husband, perched on a man's bed, of pressure and urgency, of fear. 'Mary, I must go, suppose I were to be found here! Don't keep me, just tell me, just promise me! After all—if only for an hour you stole him from me, you ruined him in his own eyes—:and indeed in mine. Don't you owe me—?'

'He's coming!' she said sharply. 'Quick, quick! Yes, all right, I promise you, I swear, he shall be safe. I swear! But quick—go!'

Too late! As I slid open the door, footsteps came down the companion. I darted back and was closing the door; but it was Richardson. 'Get back!' he said. 'He's coming.' He crowded in with me and the door closed on us.

Feet running down the steps, approaching. A hand beat at the door. 'Richardson!'

Richardson called back: 'Just coming, sir!'

'Then come! Open the door and come out!'

At the tone of that voice, Richardson swore beneath his breath, 'Oh, my God!' He opened the door as little as possible and slid out. My husband said, 'Why don't you open it wide?'

I crushed myself back against the chest; but a hand came and thrust aside the door, and caught me by the arm and I was yanked out into the saloon. My husband was standing there and his face was grey and the dark eyes ablaze and the black beard jutted in a very ecstasy of outrage. I was vaguely aware that Richardson slid-to the cabin door behind us, closing Mary in. I stammered: 'Mr Richardson was showing me—'

'I know what Mr Richardson was showing you,' said my husband, 'and not for the first time. Filthy slut!—do you think I haven't watched you, hanging about with the men, lusting after them? And you!' He swung round upon

Richardson. ‘You, at least, I thought I could trust, I allowed you to speak with her... Bitch!’ he cried out, almost screaming at me. ‘Dirty little country-bred bitch, tumbled by every farm-dog for miles around, I dare say, before they foisted you on to me, thankful to get you off their hands. You with your airs and graces of piety, pretending ignorance! Do you think I don’t know how you struggle to conceal your lascivious passions when I—come to you, do you think I haven’t known you all along for what you are? And now, not five days out to sea and you’re sidling and ogling at my men, offering your ditch-draggled charms...!’ And he said in a sort of terrible, hissed aside: ‘And you said that *I* disgusted you!’ and lifted his hand and slapped it across my face so that my head jerked back, and slapped it again and would have again had not the first mate caught hold of his arm. ‘Don’t touch her!’ he cried out. ‘She’s innocent as a child! Don’t you dare lay your hands on her!’

My husband flung aside his hand, caught me by the wrist, flung me towards the door of the main cabin. Richardson said, white-faced, ‘If once more you lay your hand on her—!’

‘I’ll lay more than a hand on *you*,’ my husband yelled back at him. ‘I’ll have you in irons for the rest of the trip, I’ll have you in court at the end of it, fornicating with your captain’s wife—’

‘I never touched the girl. We never did more than exchange civil conversation.’

My husband jerked his thumb back at me as I cowered against the door. ‘And closed yourself in your cabin with her to do so. All this time, while I’ve been at the wheel—’

‘I’ve been up on deck, sir. You must have seen me.’

‘Do I watch my men like a hawk lest they make themselves familiar with my wife?’

‘It seems that you do sir,’ said Richardson, furiously. ‘But let you watch every hour of every day for the rest of your life, you’ll find no fault in her, unless your mind is sick. And if you think she’s guilty with me or any man in this ship, then your mind *is* sick. Poor, innocent child with a heart like a flower—’

‘Be silent!’ my husband screamed out again and swung round upon him in his turn. ‘You shall be taken into charge and stay under duress until we reach land. Stay here until I return, or it’ll be that much the worse for you.’ And he flung back the door to his cabin and mine and took me by the shoulder to thrust me inside. ‘I’ll deal with you when I’ve dealt with *her*,’ he said.

And the door of Richardson’s cabin opened; and Honey Mary stepped out.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SMALL, CRAMPED SALOON was lighted from above, the winter sunshine filtering through the glass roof raised above the level of the deck. It gleamed down on her hair, so that it seemed like an aureole of gold, all tumbled about her head. She was magnificent: standing there in all her beauty, in the dress of emerald green, chin uplifted, looking back at him with scorn in her eyes. ‘Well, my fine Captain—like all bullies you take it out on the weak and helpless: cheap, crawling coward that you are!’

He was too thunderstruck with amazement at seeing her there, even to hear her. With amazement—and with a dawning terror of what her presence could mean to him, he stammered out: ‘What is she doing here? What’s this woman doing here?’

Mischiefous, laughing, she looked back into his face. ‘Why, what should I be doing?’ she said, ‘—but coming after my own true love,’ and she went to him and caught him by the shoulders before he had time to stagger back away from her, pressing her body up close against his. ‘Will you not love me again, my Captain, as you did before?’

He thrust her aside. ‘Take your hands off me! Don’t you lay your hands on me—’

‘Ah, but you laid your hands on *me*, my fine love,’ she cried. ‘Didn’t you? And after such a night of loving—how could I not come back for more?’ She gestured to me where I cowered at the door of my cabin. ‘So now leave this innocent in peace, you have a worthier playmate aboard for those ugly games of yours!’

And again it was as though time were suspended; as

though the ship existed not at all nor the limitless seas on which she sailed, as if all space and all time, all sight and all sound were confined to the storm that raged within these narrow walls, the leaden darkness thrust through with white flashes of lightning, the silence split with great crashes of thunder dying away into silence again. For how long that silence endured, I could not tell. My husband said, and his voice had been brought by a huge effort of will to normality, 'Get hold of her. Keep her from me.' And as Richardson caught her by the arm, and stood between them: 'What has been going on?'

'She smuggled herself aboard, sir. No one knew of it.'

'The crew knew nothing?'

'They knew nothing,' said Mary. 'Why should they? I didn't come after *them*.'

'Be silent!' he said; and to Richardson: 'How long have you known of this?'

'From the first day out, sir.'

'And kept it from me?'

'We thought we could put her ashore at the first landfall and pack her back home. We thought it would be best if you knew nothing of it.' He added, with a sort of warning in his voice: 'Best for you.'

'As early as that, we could have turned and taken her back.'

'If you'd done that,' said Mary, 'they knew what tales I'd have told.'

He said steadily: 'She could tell nothing of me that was true,' but I had known that he could not lie and now his face was not grey but stained with a deep flush over the weathered skin. He amended: 'She could tell nothing of me that would be believed.'

'There was another there who would have confirmed

the truth,' she said. 'The *Dei Gratia* wouldn't yet have sailed; and Davey Morehouse knows all the truth about me and thee, Captain Briggs.'

'*Morehouse?*' he said, too much astonished to silence her.

'You refused his bet—a bottle of whisky that he would touch land before you did. You gave him one of your lectures, preaching prig that you are!—and he was resolved to bring you down from your pulpit. So he made another wager. He wagered me this cross that I'd not seduce you to lie with me before you sailed from New York.' And she put her hand to the low neck of her gown and fished out the gold cross and dangled it before their eyes. 'This tells them all whether you lay with me or not.'

And the darkness was there again and the storm; but now the thunder rumbled on a muted key. He stammered: 'I went to you... It was to save your soul...'

It was horrible to see him brought so low. I came a little forward from the doorway where I'd crouched all this time. I said: 'I asked him to go. I asked my husband to help her. I thought she was lost—'

'If I'm lost,' said Mary, 'then so is he.'

If he could not tell lies for himself, then I'd tell them for him. I said: 'You say this out of—mischief, Mary. You resent his interference in the lives of—of those who would go with you. You want to do him harm.' And I pleaded, 'It amuses you to do him harm, to tell fibs about him. That's all it is.'

She turned her head and looked at me with the old, kind look; but she said only, 'Let him tell them so himself.'

He could not. His passions might get the better of him, fierce and uncontrolled, but he was a god in his soul, within his soul he was good and feared God, he was integrity personified. He could not tell a lie. He made no more

denials, ignored her, quietly took command. 'She must be kept apart. We must keep her until we touch Portugal, but meanwhile...' To Richardson he said, 'She's been hidden away from *me* all this time. Where can she be hidden now?'

'I've been hiding in the men's bunks,' said Mary. 'Shall I not be hidden now in yours?' And she looked over towards me, laughing. 'With Mrs Briggs' permission; but I think she's not likely to break her heart if her Captain has another bed-fellow and she sleeps alone.'

He ignored her still. 'On the lower deck—'

She wrenched her arm from Richardson's grasp and took a step forward. 'On the lower decks! Where the pigstys are? You just try penning me up on the lower deck, Captain Briggs!—I'll spread abroad such tales of you if you do, as will make all your life a hell to you for the rest of your days. True or false, what do I care? The truth is bad enough; but just chain me up like a beast where the beasts are kept and I'll speak such filth of you that the very styes themselves will smell sweeter in the nostrils of sailing men.' She tore herself again from the mate's restraining grip and stood foresquare, feet apart, hands on hips, and laughed no longer, and was sweet no longer but a street-woman, strong, vulgar, violent, in a cold black rage. 'Just you dare to send me down there!'

He looked almost helplessly at Richardson. Richardson said: 'She can't be kept below decks, sir. And where else? There's only the men's bunks in the fore deckhouse and five of them sleeping there; and the boy's bunk in the galley.' He shrugged. 'Shall I give her my cabin, sir, and doss down where I may?'

To have her here! So close! 'It's not decent,' my husband said, 'with Mrs Briggs so near.'

'Oh, but what would make it decent,' said Mary, 'but

Mrs Briggs being so near?' She had returned to her even temper, she gave me one of her tender, kindly looks. 'Mrs Briggs has nothing to fear from me,' she said. 'She has harm enough coming to her from elsewhere.'

'You will be locked in,' said my husband, speaking directly to her for the first time. 'You will speak to no one. And if the crew know what's good for them, none will speak to *you*. I have yet to be convinced that they didn't bring you aboard, and if they did...' He left the threat hanging in the air. 'Go back to your cabin,' he said to me, and to Richardson: 'See to it then,' and he swung about and went away up the companion steps. Richardson said: 'Come Mary!' and followed her into his cabin. They left the door open, for fear, I suppose, of the Captain returning and finding them closeted together there. I went into my own cabin but I stood at the door, leaving it open a crack to hear what they said. He said half whispering, 'Best do what he says or he'll make trouble for us all.'

'He dare not,' she said, not whispering at all.

'He will, Mary. There's nothing you can do against him that'll save *us*, if he lays charges against us.'

'But I'll threaten him—'

'Mary, hush!' he said. 'What the ship's Master may have done with a waterfront woman will make no difference if he brings his crew before a court of law. You've had your say now, you've had your revenge. God knows what the men will be saying of him, now and when they come ashore. For the rest, keep quiet, do no more; you'll be snug enough in here, I'll bring you your things'

I heard my husband's voice above decks, shouting orders to the men in the rigging, and dared to open my door a little. I besought her: 'Mary, please! You've done enough.'

'Enough to spread his ill fame all over the waterfronts,'

she said, 'so why stop now, what difference will it make?'

'Rumours will spread. The men will talk, of course. But they'll be only half believed. If it can't be denied that the moment he discovered your presence aboard, you were kept close, kept a prisoner, then no one can say that he brought you aboard for himself. That he went with you once... That you seduced him just the once by your wicked ways—he could live with that, Mary. Every man is human, no one can know that better than seamen, betraying their wives in every port across the world. He'll preach no longer, perhaps, he must admit to failure; but that's very different from bringing you to sea with him, and with his wife aboard

'You're a fool about the man,' she said, resentfully.

'I'm not a fool about my whole future. What future would he have if he couldn't any longer go to sea? And his future is mine.'

'Well, in that God help you, poor little thing!' she said; and to Richardson, shrugging: 'Very well. But on one condition. Let him lay one hand on her in unkindness, let him speak one bullying word to her—and I take it all back, I'll submit no more. On that understanding, I'll behave like an angel—well, hardly that: you can't close up a tigress in a cage like this and expect her to do nothing but purr. But I'll promise, the crew shall know that I'm kept here under duress and in silence. No one shall say that he brought me aboard or wished me here. So, come take your property, Albert, and go and get me mine.' She pushed him out of the cabin and slammed-to the door. He said to me quietly, 'Close your cabin door, Ma'am, and stay there, keep out of the way of more trouble,' and he gave me a glance, half pitying, half conspiratorial and went away. I waited a moment to see whether Mary would open the cabin door but she did not. He hadn't locked it. She had given her

promise. I think that that was enough for both of them.

CHAPTER IX

HOW STRANGE IT IS to recall that out of conditions so extraordinary, we should have settled for the next weeks into a sort of routine. When breakfast was over, I would tidy up my cabin and vacate it, so that Mary might be released from her prison and go there, where there were more facilities for her ablutions. I saw to it that tubs of hot water were ready for her and toilet soap and suds; I knew what it must mean to her to keep herself and her clothes as she always did, so scrupulously spick and span. I had feared on the first day to return with my husband and find the place festooned with her intimate under-garments, hung out to dry, but she played no teasing tricks on *me*; everything disappeared with her, back to her cell and I presume she dealt with it there. And all the time, she left no sign of her having used my premises; no spilt water, no soiled towels, no bowls and basins that had not been emptied all into the one tub, wiped round and the cloths wrung out and hung across the rim to dry. Not my mother nor my sisters, so apt and practical back home in the neat little house in Massachusetts, could have kept all so tidy and clean.

Back home in Massachusetts! Could they but have known! Poor, vague, silly helpless little Sarah, caged between a lion and a tigress, each raging, helpless, in cages of their own—my husband in the grip of those twin passions of desire and shame, of terror at the pass he had been brought to, of the day of discovery to come, to which, however, he must drive his ship ever faster and more smoothly on; she in her close confinement, idle and bored, plotting what mischief she might that wouldn't break her

promise to ‘behave’. I think they should not have sold me into slavery at my husband’s hands, that family of mine. Looking back I absolve my father of all but a too hasty relief at finding for his difficult child a respectable and an older man, but I think that my mother knew better—I think that my mother, though she might not understand my weaknesses, was too well aware of them to be guiltless in offering up so frail a victim to the mercies of such a beast of prey as Benjamin Briggs. Can it be possible that she didn’t ask herself why he should choose *me*, from that quiverful of excellent daughters, useful, capable: only not beautiful. But —she could get rid of a nuisance, my father of a responsibility. That I should within a few brief weeks be forced by my married loyalty to a half-sadistic monomaniac, to go down on my knees to a waterfront harlot, could hardly, I suppose have occurred to either of them. I sometimes wondered how my smug, clever sisters would have acted in my place.

For all went by no means so smoothly as that word ‘routine’ might suggest. Caged she might be and submit to it, but the tigress still used her polished claws. Someone must take her her food. On the first evening, my husband stood by while the cookboy and steward, Edward Head, opened the door just enough to introduce the tray. She took the tray with her left hand but with her right pushed the door wide. ‘Are you there, my honey?’ she said to my husband, ‘—standing back in the shadows under the swinging lamp where you think I shan’t find you out. But I see you: come forward, come closer, we were close enough once, when you flung me to the floor and rolled with me there, and I naked in those strong arms of your; not even waiting to come to the bed!’ He strode forward and slammed shut the door but from behind the partition her

triumphant laughter rang out like a chime of bells. I quickly closed the slit of my own cabin door and was back, sitting at my melodeon when he came into my cabin. He sat down heavily at the table, his face in his hands. Pretending ignorance of anything newly untoward, I rose and went to the little window. I said: 'The air's very strange. Does it mean a storm brewing?'

And appropriately enough! I thought—after the storm enclosed by time and space, that had raged that day. It had grown dark early, no stars in the sky, the sea in the evening gloom only a restless threshing of unseen waters with glimpses of white spray. The air was very heavy, cold and yet sultry if such a thing could be. I thought to myself that such a phrase well expressed my husband's habitual humour: cold and yet sultry. Until now...

He made no direct answer. He lifted his head at last and said: 'You heard?'

'The partitions are thin.'

'The woman is a devil,' he said. 'What can be done?'

It was the first time he had spoken directly to me since she had confronted him; if indeed he spoke to me now and not mostly to himself. I answered, however. 'She's teasing you. She'll do you no real harm.'

'No harm? What do you think she's doing to me now?'

'None heard but the steward, and he'd only half believe, a poor, thick-headed boy like that. No one will attend to him.'

He raised his head, staring at me as though he noticed me now for the first time. 'You seem very confident,' he said. 'What do you know of all this?'

Not a word of remorse for those vile accusations, since proved totally untrue, for having struck me across the face. I said coldly, 'You may treat me as a fool, but that doesn't

make me one.'

'You were in that cabin with her—with her and Richardson. What were you doing there?'

'Richardson had that moment come there—to warn me that you'd left the wheel. I'd been there alone with her.'

'Alone with her! You'd been alone in the company of a woman like that?'

I said almost savagely, I couldn't control myself: 'You've been alone with her also, in your time.'

He did not deny it. He put his head again in his hands. 'The serpent beguiled me,' he said, 'and I did eat.' It was not very often that he quoted from the Bible though I believe that he knew it almost by heart; since he had taught himself to think that he was as good as God, he believed, I suppose, that his words could match the words of the Bible. But now he said it simply—far more simply than in his own words he would ever have expressed it. 'The serpent beguiled me

'It is a sin as old as Adam's,' he said. 'It is the first sin.'

I did not remind him that it was Eve who had spoken those words. I said only: 'Is it not simply nature?'

He turned upon me again his dark face, heavy with despair. 'The world will have other names for it, when the world knows that Captain Benjamin Briggs has been guilty of it.'

'That was the reason I went to her. To plead with her not to tell of it.'

He said disgustedly: 'You lowered yourself to plead with such a woman as that?'

The day had been very long and terrifying, I was worn out with anxiety and fear, with the anxiety and fear I had felt for *him*; with the shock of his foul accusations as to my conduct with the crew, with the shock to us both of Mary's appearance; with those last brief moments of appeal to her

on his behalf. My head ached, my heart was sick within me, I felt that I had been through the storm which was in fact shortly to come... I lost my temper. 'I lowered myself! You lowered yourself even further, I understand. To the floor, she said. You couldn't even wait to take her to a bed, but rolled with her like two animals on the floor. Naked, she said.' He was silent with a terrible silence. 'I went to her to beg her not to make these ugly revelations. She agreed at last. But for your vile accusations of me—which she must reveal herself, to disprove—you need never have known she was aboard, the men need never have known of your downfall, for she'd told nobody and Captain Morehouse had agreed with her to say nothing. She meant to taunt you and tease you, to exert a little blackmail perhaps, for trinkets or clothes, no more, there's no ugliness in her and no greed. But she had no wish to destroy you, that would have been all of it, the end.' And I went and fetched the little mirror from the wall and held it close up under the swinging lamp and peered into it. 'I have the stain still, Captain Briggs, where you hit me across my face. I wish it might stay there always, disfiguring though it may be, to remind me every time I look in the glass of what you really are; to remind *you*, when ever you may look at me, of what you really are.' I flung down the mirror on the table beside him. 'I promised to love, honour and obey you. Well, I absolve myself of those promises.' He stared up at me, bereft of words, but J was not bereft, I went viciously on. 'As to love—you'll hardly now expect that of me?—nor honour either, I suppose? And as to obedience—that presupposed you to be a decent man. Well, you're not a decent man, you're a man not fit to have a dog at his command let alone a human creature, let alone a young woman defenceless. Or as you thought, defenceless. But I'm not. Stupid I may be, God

knows I've been told so often enough. Well, I'll play the stupid now, I'm too stupid to understand your commands any more—or your demands either; too stupid to cower, creep-mouse, and let you hurl your filthy epithets at me and let them lie, when you're proved wrong, never unsay a word, let the filth lie—as the stain lies still across my face, of your stinging hand... But not so stupid that I'll stay in this cabin one moment more with you, in this foetid air made more vile by the emanations of your foetid mind.' Where I got such fine expressions, I don't know; but I felt clean, purged of the dirt he had flung at me, like ordure flung at a creature caught in the stocks; and I caught up my shawl and swept out of the cabin and into the saloon, and unloosed the door of the mate's cabin. 'Mary,' I said, loud enough for my husband to hear, 'come with me. We'll go up to the deck.'

For once she lost her cool acceptance, she said: 'But I can't, I've given my word.' Richardson had been right to trust to the illogical integrities of a woman of the streets.

'You can come back. I'll be your gaoler; and you can't run very far! You've promised to make no more trouble

'Hardly that,' she said, laughing.

'Well, you'll make none for me, Mary, I know. So bring your shawl and we'll breathe in some clean fresh air.'

She wrapped her bright shawl about her and took my hand; and, I leading, we went up the companion and to the deck rail and looked out over the sea. My husband made no move to prevent our going.

Up here on deck, the air was heavy as lead and yet a wind blew, lashing up the waves in the darkness, tossing the ship so that we must cling tight to the rail, lurching as we lifted our hands for a moment to raise our shawls and wrap them

over our heads, one hand holding them close at the throat, the other back, grasping the bulwarks—if bulwarks is the term; the words come back to me but I have long forgotten what little I ever learned in the few brief weeks of my life that were spent at sea. All about us, the restless dark: no horizon now, sea met sky in a bowl of black, flecked only with the white flashes of the wave-tops. Against the ship's pale hull, the dark water lifted and thundered, splashing back in a flurry of white foam that threw up a sprinkle of salt water. We started back, startled, but leaned forward again, thrusting out our faces to the clean, fresh sting of it; our hair broke loose from the tight-wrapped shawls and whipped about our cheeks; as the gale heightened our heavy skirts swirled about our legs, we let go of the rail to hold them close and without the steadyng clutch, reeled and staggered, laughing, supporting one another. All about the ship now, men ran, calling; in the glow of a lantern we could see the mate's face, shadowed, as he clung two-fisted to the wheel, turning her, hand following hand on the heavy spokes, to port, hand after hand to starboard, again. My husband came hurrying up the companion-way, all but his ship forgotten; stood gazing up into the rigging, his heavy serge trousers flattened against his legs, shouting to the men who hung like monkeys, with spread feet and gripping hands, reefing in the sails. In the oaken buckets along the edge of the poop deck, the water sloshed to and fro, spilling over, forming little runnels that wavered like small rivers, run this way and that by the movement of the ship. There was a sort of low, moaning sound as the wind got up, like the music of a violin wailing against the drum-rattle of the sails flap-flapping, the beating of rope against wood, the creak of the timbers as the little ship ploughed on, the waves lashing up white against her hull. Past orders meant

no more to me now, I took Mary's hand and, leaning into the wind we fought our way up to the bows... Into the bows of the ship, into the forepeak, leaning forward to stare out across the unseen waters... Mary said, 'It's like being a figurehead, under the bowsprit, thrusting out into the sea

I am a figurehead—chin thrust forward into the gale, streamlined by the wind whipping back my streaming hair, my shawl wrapped close by the wind streaming out behind me, my gown wrapped about my body by the wind, streaming out behind me like the wings of the Winged Victory. I am a figurehead, leaning into the wind with the salt water dashing up against my pale face, washing away the stains of my husband's hand. I am a figurehead not a wooden thing now but of flesh and blood with a will and a strength—with a heart of my own...

Now I might have taken the food to her cabin myself, but she would have none of that. 'No, no, my honey, you do me out of all the little amusement I may get.' So he must send one or other of the men; and she would force aside the door and standing there in the opening, her wicked eyes alight with mischief call out across the saloon: 'Are you there, my honey-love, are you watching me? Where is he, does the tiger not hear the belling of his tigress in her lair?' And so at last, ashamed that others should hear her—even though they would never believe it to be true—not of the famous Captain Briggs—he must take the food to her himself, bringing me to stand beside him, jamming the door so that it opened only far enough to hand in the plates. But she ignored me, snaked out a golden arm, caught him by the hair. 'Is it you at last, have you come to me at last, my Samson?—have you come at last to love me, as you loved me through the long hours till our strength was gone?—you

who had had the strength of Samson to resist, till Delilah got her fingers into this rough, dark hair...' He interrupted her furiously, raising his voice in curses I had never heard before, but she outshriilled him; and when at last he slammed the door across her laughing face, called out to him still until I opened the door and said, 'Be silent now, Mary. He's not here, he's gone.'

She relapsed back on the bunk, drumming the scarlet heels of her boots—she wore the red dress again today—against the mate's wooden sea-chest, stowed away under it. 'So he runs scuttling off,' she said, 'and leaves it to you to quiet the great cat in its cage. What a gutless coward and poltroon the creature is!'

'If he's a coward,' I said, 'it's out of shame.'

'Then he's a coward to *be* ashamed. Low, crawling thing!—afraid to face the world of men for doing what any man does and struts like a cockerel afterwards for pride, not mealy-mouthed, preaching, pretending innocence

'He makes no pretence,' I said, defending him. 'He tells no lies. And I don't think he'll preach any more.'

'He'd have preached and pretended,' she said, 'if he hadn't been found out. He's preached and pretended all his life. Why doesn't he admit to being like other men?'

'He thinks other men do wrong,' I said, 'in giving way to their worse natures.'

She reached up her lovely arms, so creamy white, ran her fingers through the heavy curls that fell about her shoulders, lifted her hair up and away from her neck, let it fall again. I see the movement now in its unconscious grace and I knew that if I had been a man, I could never have resisted her. 'He believes it wrong,' I said, 'and so of course it *is* wrong, for him; and so he falls from his own high self-esteem. But... The serpent beguiled him 'Trust Adam,' she

said, 'to shift the blame to Eve!'

My husband and I made each a grave mistake—two terrible mistakes which were to have unimaginable consequences. Brave in my new-found strength, I refused him all bodily contact with me. Craven in his dread of her taunting, he kept her close shut in her trap. But the tiger had tasted red meat and now knew the hunger for more; and the tigress had fed all her life upon men and could not for too long be denied. In a night of dead calm, she broke out of her cage: and they two ravenous creatures came face to face.

CHAPTER X

THE DAYS PASSED AND, as I've said, fell into a sort of routine. When the dinner hour was over, we would go up on deck, Honey Mary and I, harlot and innocent, and there gossip and laugh like two ordinary young women, taking our exercise round and round the narrow decks, sitting in my hammock corner amidships, out of the way; or curl up on the bunk in Richardson's cabin and there amuse ourselves as best we might with the few diversions at our disposal. My husband had forbidden me novels but we played a sort of game of alternative storytelling, each taking up where the other left off; and the men had devised us a draughts board. But Mary beat me every time. Nor was it very easy to play for we had come into real Atlantic weather, very rough with a heavy swell and the ship rolled and tilted till the draughtsmen ran sliding into her territory or mine and made a nonsense of the whole thing. So mostly we conversed and it's wonderful to think what we could find to talk about over those weeks together, cut off from other company—for true to her undertaking, she spoke to no one else during our times up on deck and now she accepted my bringing the food to her cabin and made no more trouble over that. For the rest, I told her of my quiet country home and, dull though it all seemed to me, to her it was of intense interest to learn of a life that she had never given thought to—a life where a young woman might not lift her skirts above her ankles; where best clothes were reserved for Sunday going to church, and replaced only when new apparel for church became necessary, so that even the young girls went always soberly attired; where the events of

the year were the festivals attached to the chapel, with no balls or parties, for dancing was a sin; where the heights of excitement were the picnic parties, in our home town and in those close enough by, to ride to or drive—where the mothers of eligible young men and indeed the young men themselves looked not so much to a girl's pretty looks or charming ways, but to the hampers they produced and the excellence of the pies and cakes they handed round. 'But surely the mothers just did the cooking themselves,' said Mary, 'and pretended the daughters did it?' That church-going people would not cheat and deceive never entered that head of hers. I remembered my mother's helpless shame as I produced my poor offerings. No wonder she had been thankful when Captain Briggs came along and, careless of such shortcomings, took one look, as I now knew, at a something in me that stirred his physical senses and out of them all, chose *me*. After all, he was mostly at sea with a cook in the galley; and no doubt he recognised that such a fool as I must be grateful and therefore docile and uncomplaining; that I came from a family who would never listen to, let alone accept, for that matter would never comprehend, any complaints I might make—but would never dare to make—of his treatment of his wife. Indeed, how my parents ever came to contrive half a dozen children between them, I wonder still.

A ship is a restless, moving, sounding thing, rocking, swaying, dipping, with everything aboard her having a life of its own: the hanging oil lamps swinging, small articles sliding this way and that with the motion of the vessel, the water sloshing in the brass-bound firebuckets, and over all the rattle of the sails in the breeze, the ceaseless creak and groan of rope straining against wood; and, eternally, the

slap and hiss of the sea against the curved hull cutting its way through the waves. My husband's watch hung on its chain on the white painted wall at the head of the bed; as I kneel here on my prie-Dieu before the carved crucifix, I seem still to hear its loud ticking in my ears, as I heard it through those long, long sleepless nights: ticking away the little time left for me to pray his soul back out of the limbo of his present penance into the eternal light. Be merciful, oh God!—for his sins arose from those passions which You implanted in his body, against which even his fear and respect for his Maker proved at last too frail... Can You hold him responsible, most merciful Lord?—for sins committed when surely his mind was no longer the sane mind of the man who had loved and feared You all his life. For truly in his heart and soul, until his mind betrayed him, my husband, Benjamin Briggs, was a Godfearing man...

Lying sleepless there through the long nights with the log of his body lying beside me, asleep or waking I cared not—should I not have known? In all that small, enclosed world of sound and movement, should I not have recognised that not every sound, not every movement was part of the ceaseless sound and movement of a speeding ship? But we came at last into a calm—and then I knew.

It was very strange, that sudden calm at sea. All at once—quietness. All at once—stillness. All sails spread but no straining and bellying out before the' thrusting wind, the rigging slack and uncomplaining, the whole ship steady and motionless; and stretching limitless the glassy green of the sea, no white spray now, only a gently undulating movement as though beneath the stretched surface, a myriad dolphins heaved with their rounded backs and never broke through. The crew were set to scrubbing and polishing, the decks were white again with their lines of

dark caulking, the brass shone like gold. We had been now seventeen days at sea and come two thousand miles and much of the time had been fairly rough going; so that, though no sailor likes a calm, especially when he has a journey to complete with a cargo to deliver—there was perhaps a feeling of respite, a period for ‘catching up’ on work to bring the ship into the sort of order Captain Briggs required of her. We had perhaps eight hundred miles more to sail; and he may have looked forward to bringing her in as ship-shape as she had been when she sailed—yet another high mark against the name of a master famed for his care for his ships.

And in Honey Mary there reigned also, in these latter days, a sort of calm. Should I not have known?

For on that night—the night of November 23rd—is it sixty?—seventy?—years ago—I heard a creaking and a movement that was not part of the natural sounds of a moving ship. And I knew then. My husband, alert to every smallest detail that might affect his vessel, stirred in his sleep, forced himself to wakefulness, raised himself on his elbow and said: ‘What was that?’

‘I heard nothing,’ I said, lying.

‘Nothing?’

‘I’ve been wide awake. There’s been nothing. Not a sound.’

He rose, nevertheless, went to the cabin door, listened intently. Sick to the depths of my heart I prayed, ‘Let them keep quiet!’ He left the doorway, I heard his feet pad across the saloon, he must have gone up the companion and slid aside the door. His voice called out, low, to the man idling at the wheel: ‘Is all well?’

‘Ay, ay, sir. Not a breath of wind.’

An English voice; it must have been Richardson on the

watch. Something in my heart was glad. My husband returned. He got back into the bed—he slept on the outer side of the broad bunk, and said: ‘It was part of my dream.’ He dreamed a lot in those days, tossing and moaning in his sleep. But now we lay in silence, only the watch tick-ticking above our heads.

I slept at last: was startled awake by a violent oath, my husband leapt out of the bunk and, in his nightshirt, rushed across and flung back the cabin door. I scrambled out and followed him. The door of the chief mate’s cabin where Mary slept was half closed; and the second mate, Gilling, who was standing at the foot of the companion-way up out of the saloon, turned back.

My husband yelled out his name in a violent command; and the door of the cabin opened wide and Mary stood there, with her bright hair tumbled back over her shoulders and her wicked, mischievous, half-horrified, half-triumphant face. And she was naked.

My mind was numbed with terror, what time passed I could not tell; as I stood there in the doorway, words thundered between the two men, my husband black with outrage, the mate in a sort of defiant bravado: I see only in my mind’s eye that ivory figure standing there with her head flung back and all the golden hair curling about her splendid shoulders—laughing. He cried to her to close the door upon her shame, I know; cursed at the man Gilling, vilifying him as a foul, Godless lecher—and she called back to him that he had seen her thus before, had he not? and made no objection then—and Gilling laughed also then and said that he’d done no more than the Master had before him, as now it seemed... And the time passed, or no time passed, I couldn’t say; but there was a sort of blackness, a faintness, and then suddenly my husband was standing

towering over me. ‘You knew of this! You’ve known of it all along! When I asked you if you heard the sounds of his creeping to her bed, you answered—no...’ And because the man stood defiant, I suppose, and because the woman stood naked and he dared not approach her, all his fear and wrath turned themselves upon me, crouching there helpless, clinging to the edge of the doorway, trembling, shuddering, a pitiful, guilty thing. ‘Did you not know of it?’ he yelled at me, standing over me there. ‘Did you not hear him come to her? Did you not lie to me...?’ I could not answer him: and for a second time he lifted his hand to me.

She came out of her cabin. She had flung about her body the cashmere shawl as some sort of cover for her nakedness. Gilling had started forward but she came up to us first. She caught at the upraised arm, pressing her body against him so that in shame he could not force his arm down against her slighter strength as he might otherwise have done. ‘You thing of filth!’ she said to him. ‘You craven creature, choosing the small and defenceless to wreak your vengeance on! Well—you’ve done for yourself now!’ And she stood away from him, triumphant. ‘I swore I’d make no trouble for you—while you left this poor girl unharmed. That no longer holds good. So, Master Briggs, look out for yourself! For you shall pay—and pay—and pay!’ She turned and left us. ‘Go back to your bed, Sarah,’ she said, turning at the cabin door, ‘lie down and try to rest yourself, poor little thing! He’ll not interfere with you.’ And to Gilling: ‘Get back up on deck. Tell the men, tell them anything you like. He took me, back in New York, rolled with me like an animal on the floor of my room and me as naked as I stand before you now! Captain Morehouse bet with me and I won. Tell all the men; no promises of mine hold good any more. From now on, Honey Mary is free of this ship; and he’ll pay and

pay

Even now I crept forward. I said to her, imploring: 'Mary! Have mercy! What harm has he done to *you*?'

'He is a craven creature,' she said. 'He makes me sick.' She went back into the cabin and slammed-to the door.

I crept back into my own cabin, huddled on the bed, crouched there in my decent long flannel nightgown with its high neck, edged with a little frill of its own flannel, scallop-edged, feather-stitched on, with its full sleeves gathered at the wrist. No man but my husband had seen me in my nightgown before and he only as I scampered across the room, wriggled out of my wrapper, then hastily crawled into bed lest I appear indecent in his eyes... (Indecent! When you think of what was to come!) And now... He came into the room. He stood there, his face grey against the creeping of the dawn through the glass above his head: his eyes black as coals and his black, jutting beard. He said: 'Did you see her stand there?—naked. Did you see her stand there with her body naked, unashamed?' And he fell to his knees at the small central table and put his head in his hands and cried out aloud: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!' I didn't know whether he cried out or whether he prayed. And if he prayed—what it was that he prayed for? I didn't know whether he prayed because once he had held that naked body in his arms; or, in the depths of his soul, that he might do so again. I think he did not know himself what prayer he prayed.

CHAPTER XI

A COWARD ALWAYS WAS her charge against him; but he was perhaps not wholly a coward then. For when at last he rose from his knees, his mind had been made up to a course of action which I think had nothing in it of cowardice. ‘Sarah,’ he said, ‘I shall dress now and then wait in the saloon for you. Dress yourself as quickly as you can; and then come to me there.’ (To think that husband and wife should undress and dress together in the same room—even at such a time, unimaginable!) I did as he bade me. When I came to the saloon, some breakfast had been placed upon the table. No one else was there. He ate steadily while I tried to choke down some crumb to sustain me for the day of dread ahead of me; we drank our mugs of bitter coffee; the ship made no movement, whatever storms raged within the hearts of men, in the boundless vasts of nature all about us, no breeze stirred. When he had done he wiped his lips and beard carefully, looked me over critically, took me by the wrist and led me up to the deck. Goodschaad was at the wheel. My husband went up and took over from him. He said: ‘Summon the men. Wake up any that are sleeping; muster the whole crew before me here.’

Richardson, the first mate, came before the rest. He ran up the two or three steps that led to the poop deck. He said: ‘I’m sorry there should be this trouble. It’s been none of my making, sir. I stand by your orders.’

‘You were here,’ my husband said to him. ‘You saw the man go down to the saloon.’

‘No, sir,’ said Richardson. ‘I saw nothing. The wheel moves not a fraction, there’s no need to do more than keep

an eye on it. I moved away many times. I didn't see him go.'

Now the men began to appear, the four Germans, Martens, Goodschaad and the brothers Lorenzen, the cook, eyes agoggle, and, slouching along behind them, insolent and triumphant, the second mate, Gilling. My husband said to Richardson: 'Go down and stand with them.' I had stood by wretchedly, against the rail, silent; now he took me again by the wrist and moved forward the few paces that were all the space between the wheel and the rail of the poop deck. His eye glanced automatically about the ship to see that in the windless calm all attention might for the next few minutes safely be diverted from her. His hand holding my wrist in his tight grip was steady. He said: 'I have something to say to you.'

'Ve haf hert,' said Boz Lorenzen, grinning behind his hand.

My husband ignored him. He said: 'It has been made known to you now what relations I have had—upon one occasion, ashore in New York—with the whore, Mary Sellers, whom you smuggled aboard this ship, I knowing nothing of it. What you've been told is true—or I'll tell you precisely the truth, in case in the details you have been misled. You all know my reputation: I have tried to live my life as a man who hopes for salvation. But—I am a man. The woman came with false tears and a false story. My wife, in her ignorance, took pity on her. She promised repentance but later she let it be seen by us that for her very bread—or so we understood it—she was driven back to her evil ways. Ask my wife if it was not she who begged me to go to the woman and try to help her once more.'

So this was why I had been brought here; held here by my wrist as though in a handcuff. I said: 'Yes. I told him to go.'

And she stood there, Honey Mary, leaning casually against the edge of the open companion-way door. ‘Trust Adam,’ she said as once she had said before, ‘to put the blame on Eve!’

There was a snigger among the men: they turned to look at her as she lounged there, in her scarlet dress with its scrolls of bold white braid, the front unbuttoned so that the blue white of the lace-frilled bodice showed against the creamy skin, and the swell of her bosom beneath it; and nestling in her bosom the gleam of the gold cross.

My husband did not flinch beneath her mocking gaze. He said, ‘I put no blame upon my wife, poor innocent. The blame is upon that woman there, that serpent writhing down the Tree of Life to coil itself about the weakness of a weak and erring man. That I succumbed to her, I acknowledge; I am a man like all of you. Because I try to teach the word of God, that doesn’t make me God—and I’m no less vulnerable than you. I fell. She will tell you vile details of that hour that I spent in her arms—half in heaven, half in the depths of hell. What she tells you may be all true, half true, not true at all—but I confess to the sin, that is all that matters—the serpent tempted me with the forbidden fruit and I did eat. Till now she has blackmailed me with threats; but the weakness of the blackmailer is that when the secret is revealed, then the fangs of the snake are drawn. For the future, she may say what she will. My name will be a byword on the waterfronts of the world—for a little while. Well, I am a man—as a man I fell and as a man I will bear the consequences of that. For yourselves—look upon me with all your eyes and see that I who tried to be strong, was weak; who tried to be Godly, spent an ungodly hour; who tried to be better than other men, was a man. And when you have sneered and sniggered to your fill—be

about your business, get back to your work. If in a bad hour I failed to be captain of my soul—not for one moment shall I fail to be Captain of this vessel. And as your Captain, I give you my orders—no one shall have any communication with this woman. She may remain in the cabin she now occupies, food may be put on the table in the saloon and I shall see that she receives it. From now on, she shall be locked in there and in Portugal she shall be put ashore and may do and say what she will: she no longer has any hold over me. So—to your stations: in your duty to your Master and your ship, nothing has changed.' He let go of my hand, went down from the deck, at the companion-way caught Mary by the wrist and, wordless, forced her down the steps to the saloon, pushed her into the cabin and bolted the door on her. She said not a word; struggled a little in his grasp but was powerless against his man's strength. But she looked at him, I thought, with a new respect in her eyes: and a new challenge.

I kept to my cabin all that morning. I knew that he brought down Martens who acted as ship's carpenter and had a bolt and chain fixed to the outside of the cabin door, so that it would open only enough to pass in the plate of food—she could not now force it further open as she had done before. If she made any fuss or outcry, I heard nothing of it and I think she did not. I refused the midday meal. He brought me a plate to the cabin. 'You must eat,' he said. 'Stay here if you will; but you had no breakfast and you must eat.'

I was sick, weary, very much afraid; the airlessness was strangely oppressive and, ever intuitive, I had a premonition of some doom to come as yet undreamed of. He was patient and kind. I remembered how once he had seemed to place himself almost upon an equality with God; but, 'Because I

try to teach the word of God,' he had said to the men, 'that doesn't make me God—I am no less vulnerable than you.' I knew that now that the sin had been confessed and penance done, with more very sure to come, he needed no longer to defend himself with that aura of Godhead, of being something higher than a man. He spoke to me quietly, with no reference to Honey Mary; asked me to play to him a hymn tune or two on the melodeon, was not impatient as I stumbled through. 'You'll come to perfection one day,' he said, 'and it will be a—tranquillity—to both of us. We must keep our faith steady in our hearts. We must trust in God.'

If our trust in God is to be dependent upon my playing of a musical instrument, I thought to myself wryly, it will be not very secure. And, made irritable by reaction to the high emotions of that morning, I reverted in my mind to the cause of it all. 'You forget sometimes that I come from a pastor's family,' I said. 'There's no need to preach to *me* of my duty to God.'

He said, very wearily: 'I'm not preaching to you, Sarah. I daresay I shall preach no more. I shall hardly be thought fit to. Perhaps all I mean is that you must trust in God because you may feel that you can no longer trust in me.'

'It's not very long,' I said coldly, 'since you acted towards me as though you *were* as God.'

He said sadly: 'Well—we both know very well now that that was hardly true.'

It was strange to know him so subdued and sad and yet my affronted heart could not relent. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Things have not been easy for me in these past weeks. But two months ago, I was a green country girl, from a background of utterly unworldly innocence in adults and children alike. Foolish, vague and ignorant, I was pitchforked without preparation into such a marriage as

ours has been. Within a matter of days, I am the boon companion of a whore off the waterfront, and my husband is first God and in the next moment a savage striking me to the ground, and a moment after that, the meekest of the fallen. And what is to follow, God alone knows—and may He have mercy on all of us!'

'If that is a prayer,' he said, 'then let us pray!'

'I'll pray my own prayers,' I said. 'I'll pray for strength to get through such a life as this; and for the life hereafter, I will pray for my soul.'

'If you'll pray for mine,' he said, 'perhaps you will find more favour with God than I.' And he quoted a favourite quotation of my father's and therefore of my own, from the sad dispossessed queen of King Henry VIII of England. 'I think the prayers of a friend be most acceptable unto God; and therefore I pray you to remember me in yours.'

'You are my husband,' I said. 'I don't call you my friend.'

'Then I have no friend in the world,' he said; and got up and stumbled over to the bed and there threw himself down and for a long time lay staring up at the low ceiling of the cabin; and slept at last. He had had little rest the night before and I think was as exhausted as I, by the events of the morning. I sat upright in one of those two wretched swinging chairs, but when I saw that he slept, I crept down to the floor and there curled for support against the carved rosewood spindle legs of the melodeon and also fell into a doze.

Was it while I played him his hymn tunes, stumbling through with those long, fine, curiously in-adept fingers of mine—that they crept down into the saloon and released her? Or were we too much preoccupied in that conversation which in fact was the last—as such—that we were ever to

have together? We were awakened at any rate by the sound of feet pounding down the companion steps and through the saloon; our door was flung unceremoniously open. The chief mate, Richardson, stood there. He cried: 'For God's sake come, sir! They've got at the alcohol.'

My husband was up and off the bed, had caught up his peaked cap and was running through the saloon and up the companion steps before I had stumbled to my feet. I heard now a strange thudding above my head which I came to recognise as the sound of bare feet stamping along the decks, men's voices shouting and laughing. I rushed after the two men and halfway up the companion-way.

Not a breath of wind. As far as the eye could see, only the limitless sea with its faint, undulating swell of unbroken heavy green glass; no motion in sail or spar or rope or in the utter stillness of the ship. Only...

Only six of the men—but for himself and Richardson, the whole of his crew—standing, reeling, rolling in a helplessness of drunken laughter, facing my husband across the width of the ship as he stood with the first mate at his side; and on the poop deck above them, Honey Mary, with her amber eyes aglow, crying out in triumph: 'So, my fine Captain—see which of your crew will obey you now! See which of your crew will keep me caged up like a beast!' A beast of the forest, I thought, hidden at the top of the companion-way, watching it all with terror in my soul. A beast of the forest: tiger, tiger, burning bright... A golden tigress, fearless, untameable...

I could never have believed that such a change could come over a man. He seemed to grow in stature almost to a giant; the blaze that came so often to his eyes was a blaze now of black fury, his whole face seemed to grow dark with a passion of rage. In three strides he was up the steps and

half across the poop deck and had caught her by the arm, twisted it behind her and threw her violently from him to fall in a shuddering heap to the ground. ‘You foul thing of evil!’ he yelled out at her, ‘You’ve destroyed us all!’ and he left her there and flung himself down again to the main deck. A man started forward, stumbling, with raised fist; in one movement my husband had torn a belaying pin from its hold in the deck rail and thrown it with all his force. It caught the man on the head and he fell like an animal poleaxed, to the deck. Richardson said: ‘My God, sir—they’ll be dangerous now!’

As I cowered in the entrance to the companion-way, the men were to my left, bunched against the rail, my husband and the chief mate to my right and across from me Mary, huddled in her dress of scarlet, raised up three or four feet on the poop deck. She had hauled herself painfully up, clutching first at one of the oaken buckets which stood there and now toppled over spilling water all about the deck, and then to the rail. I could see how her face lit up with a new light, how her eyes took on a new gleam as she saw the wooden bolt flung and the man fall.

The man was Gilling, the second mate. Richardson ran forward, caught him by the arm, hauled him out of the way of the trampling feet; cried out, ‘Enough, sir, they’re cowed now, you have them beaten!’ ‘Beaten!’ he shouted, ‘I’ll have them beaten and at the rope’s end, but I’ll beat them first with my own two hands, and show them who’s master here!’ and fending off two with his left arm, laid about a third with the wooden club. From my hiding place half way down the companion-way, I saw Mary raise her bright head and stand there, staring. His cap had fallen off, his dark hair, loosened, tossed about his face which now seemed alive with a sort of gratified savagery, horrible to see.

Richardson, fending off the attacks of the men with his bare hands, cried out again, 'Sir, leave it! They've had enough!' Not she! The struggle was now all at the port side of the deck, around the steps that led up to the poop. She darted down the further side, came to the companion, pushed me out of her way. 'His pistol! Where does he keep his pistol?' she cried.

'His pistol?' I said stupidly. 'He has no need—'

'Oh, get aside, you fool!' she said and thrust herself past me and into our cabin; came back with the pistol in her hand—it had not been hard to find. I stood now in the saloon, weeping in terror. 'Come on, come up, you thing of whey!' she cried to me, catching me by the hand, trying to drag me with her back up to the deck. 'Come up and show yourself, stand up and be proud—be proud of such a man!'

I struggled in her grasp. 'Take your hands off me!'

She dropped them at once. She said on a new note, a note I had never heard in her voice before: 'Ay, so I will. So I will, my honey!—and get them on him, one day. And never let him go.'

I sat down on the bench at the table where we ate our meals, lay across the table with my head on my arm. For now I knew. Stupid, dull, vague, timid—very well; but I had always been aware of things that others didn't come to understand for a long time, or never understood at all. And now I knew. A coward she had always called him and affected to despise him for that reason; but I recalled how she had told me of her father, so handsome and so desirable, had made little secret to herself or to me that even as an adolescent child, she had—desired him: of the taunting, teasing mother who would give herself to any man but him—denying him what the daughter would have given him, horrible though the thought might be to me; 'so fierce

and strong, laying about him with his great mermaid stick!' The stick that he had brought home from some foreign travels, very heavy, with its carved body of a mermaiden and its tail, sharp divided, 'and a vicious bitch she was and with a taste for blood!' Many a scalp the child had seen split and bleeding in defence of her mother's virtue, by the sharp, cutting tail of the mermaid, or her blunted head. And his wife also, to enforce his demands on her. 'It amazed me that she could refuse him. If I hadn't been his daughter... But I could only look on, filled with a guilty longing to be in her place, beaten into subjection. Because, after all, I *was* his daughter.'

But she was not the daughter of Captain Benjamin Briggs.

Up on deck, there was quiet at last. He came down the companion-way, dragging her by the wrist, and thrust her to sit down at the table across from me. I saw that the pistol hung heavy, weighing down the pocket of his serge jacket, but he had forgotten it. He said: 'Do you know what you've done?'

'I have found *you*,' she said. He ignored her. She caught at his sleeve. 'Didn't I stand beside you, didn't I fend them off, didn't they run howling when you and I faced them together each with a great stick in our hand? I thought you were a coward, a poor thing; but now I know—'

He cut her off: I wondered that he had heard her so far but he also seemed strange, changed; it seemed to me that subtly, they had become one—those two. He said, however, heavily: 'You don't know what you've done—'

'I wanted to tease you. You told them to cage me up. When they're sober again—'

'They won't be sober again,' he said. 'What you've

given them is crude alcohol. Men go blind, go deaf, they die. None will ever be sober again.'

'They drank—' She broke off. 'They wouldn't drink at first. I told them it was a special barrel I'd got smuggled aboard. There was an odd number of barrels—?'

'Seventeen hundred and one,' he said. I knew that somewhere in his dark heart he was thinking how clever she had been to light upon a detail like that...

'I said that the extra barrel was mine. I said it was rum.' She looked up hopefully. 'They drank not very much; they soon knew it wasn't rum.'

'It would seem to have been enough,' he said. 'And perhaps you'll explain, who have been so clever about it all —how I'm to sail my ship eight hundred miles more across the Atlantic, myself and my chief mate, and the rest useless.'

She clung to his arm. 'I'll work for you. I'll work for you like any man, I know all about ships. Sarah will see to the woman's work.'

What had come to him that he only said, not moving himself away from her: 'And you'll go up in the rigging when the storms blow?'

'Yes,' she said. 'If you send me there.' She was like a sick woman, sick with her passion, leaning back away from him to look up into his face. 'Will you drive me up there with a belaying pin in your hand?'

Now he did shake off the clutching hands. 'I'd drive you to hell,' he said, 'if I could.'

'I'll go there willingly,' she said, 'if you'll come with me.'

'Having dragged me down so far,' he said, answering her, look for look, 'I might well go with you the rest of the way.'

I staggered up to my feet, clutching at the table, my

fingers in the slits where the fiddles would be inserted when the weather was rough and the crockery slid about the table. 'Captain Briggs,' I said, 'have you lost your mind?'

'He has lost his soul,' she said, brilliant with triumph, 'and into my keeping.'

I made to push past him; 'I'll leave you then to your pit of hell,' I said. But feet came running again, and the chief mate appeared for a second time, and now he dragged Gilling, the second mate, with him by the arm, and shoved him to stand before my husband. 'Tell the Master,' he said. 'Tell the Master what you've told me!'

Gilling reeled a little where he stood but he had evidently taken less to drink than the rest. He said sullenly: 'A fuse, sir. Among the kegs of alcohol.'

'A *fuse*?' my husband repeated: confounded.

'In among the barrels. I didn't know what I was doing. You think I'm drunk,' said Gilling, belligerently, 'but it was the battering you gave me. I got away out of it all and—well, I was mad, sir. I had a bit of drink, yes, true, but not all that much. And you hit me down to the ground'

My husband was up and had thrust Mary ahead of him so as to get out from the table, catching hold of the man by the throat of his jersey, shaking him like a rat. 'But—a fuse? What do you mean?' It seemed as though the horror of it confounded his senses. 'A fuse among the cargo—?'

'She'll go up like a rocket,' the man said, 'when the alcohol ignites.'

'You've lit a—? Among the kegs in the hold?' He grasped Gilling by the arm now, began to haul him towards the companion-way. 'Show me where!'

'You'll never see it, sir. I've thrown it deep in.'

He left the man, tore away up the companion, Richardson at his heels. Mary grasped at Gilling's arm.

‘What is it, what have you done?’

‘Lit a fuse. Thrown it in among the barrels. If the spirit catches, she’ll go up like a torch.’

‘The ship—?’

‘It’s a slow fuse. But it’s burning. Deep in among the barrels. When the alcohol ignites...’ He began to look about him, as though coming more to his senses. ‘We shall burn to death,’ he said.

She caught at my hand and together we ran up to the deck, he staggering after us. The men were there, lurching about, retching, vomiting, cursing in a volley of filthy oaths. It seemed a long time before Richardson came to us, climbing up from the hold, by the companion ladder that led down below decks. He said: ‘We can’t find it. We can see nothing, it’s like pitch down there. The Captain’s orders—’ He broke off as my husband came up after him. ‘The women must leave the ship. Lower away the yawl! You two girls—go down into her and stand off until I give you a signal, if the ship burns, you must just let the boat drift, in time you’ll be picked up, we’re in the trade routes now. Go down and get your shawls, snatch up anything warm. Be quick, there’s not a moment to lose!’ He waited for no answer, shouted to Richardson to help him, began knocking away the chocks that held the little boat, propped there towards the stern of the ship. Mary made no move; but I went down to the cabins as he had told me to, and snatched up her shawl and mine. When I came back she was still standing where I had left her, he and Richardson working at the fastenings, all the time roaring to the men to pull themselves together and come to their assistance. The yawl swung and tilted, he clung for dear life to the ropes that lowered her; she ran to his side and lent her strength to his; the boat landed with a splash on the gently heaving waters,

just to one side astern of the vessel. Richardson was tying a long rope to the rail of the deck, securing it doubly to some stanchion or bollard, I don't know the names of these things. He said: 'We'd better send the worst of the men with them.'

'Send two women out alone in the boat with such creatures?' said my husband. 'They'd not be safe a moment. Let them perish with *us*. It's their work, after all.'

'Only Gilling's.'

'They're drunk, they're out of their senses, they'd have the yawl tipped over and the whole lot drowned. The women go. Nobody else.' He got hold of me by the arm. 'Come, Sarah, down the rope! There's no time, we must get back to the hold.'

Down the rope! It dangled like a dead snake, above the frail cockle shell hardly discernible, fifteen feet or more below us, in the fading of the evening light. I cried: 'I couldn't! I couldn't!'

'Get down, you fool!' he cried. 'While you waste time here, any moment the ship may go up. We should be searching now. Richardson—?'

Richardson left us, caught up a lantern, and ran back to the companion ladder down to the hold. All about the decks, the men reeled about, or sat hunched, sick, listless, witless, useless. He said to Mary: 'Go first. She'll follow you.'

She stood perfectly still, looking back into his eyes. 'I'll go when you go,' she said.

'I go! I can't leave my ship!'

'Then I'll stay here with you,' she said.

He pushed his way past her, caught at my arm, yanked me to the rail. 'Come—no more of this! Down with you!'

But she pushed her way between us and the rail. 'You won't leave *her*. And she shan't go till I go too. And I shan't

go till you go ahead of me!'

He would have knocked her aside, I think, with as little compunction as he'd used with the men but he needed her unharmed and active, he knew that I could never make that effort alone. He said: 'I leave her to you. If you don't go and take her with you, I hold you responsible for her death. I must get back to the hold. I leave you in my place.' He turned and disappeared again below decks.

She ran from one man to another. 'Go down and help search! Come with me and help look for the fuse! If it's not found, you'll all perish: all be blown sky high and come down in a hundred pieces, legs and arms and heads and bodies, strewn about the water!—can't you understand me, don't you know what's happening, come down and help in the search!' But they were hopeless, leaden-eyed, leaden of limb, or idiotically grimacing and laughing. 'It's no use,' she said to me. 'We shall have to leave them and just go ourselves.'

'I can't go, I can't; I can't bear heights, and to slither down that rope into the darkness—'

'You don't think I mean to the boat?' she said. 'I mean, go to help *him*.'

'Down into the hold. You can't—'

'Where he goes, so will I,' she said.

I knew nothing of fuses, of the inflammability of spirit; only that at any moment, as she had said to the men, the ship might be rocketed into the air with a mighty explosion. 'There are hundreds of barrels, seventeen hundred barrels, Mary, stacked high to the cover of the hold. If the thing has been thrown in amongst them, even if he finds it, he may not reach it. And Richardson's with him there. He's told us to go down to the boat. For God's sake, come!'

She looked at me without scorn, perhaps with pity.

‘You go, my honey,’ she said. ‘But where he is, I must stay.’

Even in the midst of my misery and terror I cried out to her: ‘What’s happened to you? You hated him. What’s happened to you—both?’

‘We’ve recognised like for like,’ she said. ‘The tigress has found her mate.’

I went to the deck rail and looked down. The yawl was hardly more than a rowing boat—was, in fact a rowing boat, but with a small sail aboard: no more than fourteen or fifteen feet long. Now the calm was ending, with the coming of evening a little breeze had blown up, the brig began to rock gently, the boat bobbed and jerked at her tether, I felt that even if I somehow forced myself to slither down the rope, I might fall between the ship’s hull and the edge of the boat; nor could I manage such a craft on my own, had no strength to row, no knowledge of sail, couldn’t even swim. Besides... To go off alone, escape alone from danger leaving all these others behind—leaving another woman behind... I stood looking out across the dark waters where now the swell began to break with the familiar little streaks of white foam as the waves fell back upon themselves. I prayed: ‘Into Thy hands, oh Lord, I commend my spirit!’ And I prayed that he, my husband, might not go from the jaws of hell that now closed about him, into a hell of all eternity; that the great God who had implanted within him passions beyond his control, would be merciful at the last. And I prayed for her too: ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do...’

I stood a long time at the rail. I knew now that I must die; that surely we all must die. But death would be swift and merciful and I asked myself—poor little girl of eighteen years old—what I had to live for. What happiness had I to lose? All my life until now, I had been hectored and bullied

for my stupidity, had lived in insecurity and fear; within the last days, I had found a new strength, a new recognition of what I might be that made up for other qualities I lacked—and in the past few hours had lost it all again: was reduced to a useless, unwanted thing that might come—but I thought would not be permitted to come—between those two. I said to God in my heart: ‘I have nothing to lose, nothing to regret. It’s only that I’m afraid.’ A little breeze blew against my face, blew aside the pale hair long ago torn from its decorous bands. It was as though God had put out His hand to me and softly caressed my cheek. I lifted up my head and said again the only prayer I prayed that night for myself: ‘Into Thy hands, oh Lord...’

And the breeze blew and, like a sleeping swan, the brig seemed to spread her feathers and settle in the water, comfortably rocking on the little waves that now again went slap, slap, slap against her wet sides. Darkness fell. The stars came out.

They came up again on deck—those two, dragging Richardson between them, and laid him down on the boards in the stern of the ship. ‘He’s exhausted. Sarah, fetch some water, see to him.’ As I crouched over him, they told me, speaking together like comrades occupied in the same task. ‘We can see it—dropped down among the barrels, far out of reach...’ And he: ‘God knows how long before the fire gets to the alcohol; once a keg is burned through... It will be an inferno.’ He also was exhausted: for a moment defeated. It was she who rallied him: ‘We must beat some sense into these fools.’

But you could not. They set about the task; I, obedient, relegated to dragging myself around fetching lanterns, lighting them; in face of their shoulder-to-shoulder companionship in an almost brazen gallantry, it seemed all I

was fit to do. He bade me get water and some food for the yawl and, dully, I went about the task; but I thought that we should never reach her anyway, she with the rest would be blown to pieces when the ship went up. It was horrible below decks, all alone, creeping about in the narrow galley trying to sort out the best things to take: hagridden with the old, childhood knowledge that whatever I did would be wrong. The ship will go up, I thought, and I all alone down here... Or if she was not blown up but only caught fire... An inferno, he had said. Like a trapped rat, I scuttled this way and that, seizing up whatever I could find, wasting no more time in choice; and dragging a sack of provisions and two cans of water, I hauled myself up the companion steps and came back to the deck. They gave me only a brief glance. 'Throw the sack down into the boat,' he called out to me. 'Keep the cans to be handed down.' I threw the sack and it landed between the rocking boat and the hull of the brig. So should I land, I thought, if I tried to get down. I did not tell them that the provisions were gone; the sack floated, bobbing, crushed up between the two vessels and released again. Perhaps it would be reclaimable; but I was resigned now to the knowledge that it would never be needed.

Richardson seemed insensible, lying slackly on the deck. He had passed more time in the hold than the others and there were fumes down there, I supposed, that might overpower a man. My husband and Mary were trying to rally the crew but no sooner had they got one to his feet than he collapsed again back into torpidity. In jeering bravado, in violence or paralysed with fear at the terror which threatened them, they fended off all orders, all threats, all pleas. Mary said at last: 'It's all hopeless. And every minute's too precious. We can't risk it any longer. We must go without them.'

‘Yes, yes!’ he said, eagerly. He caught at her arm, hurried her to the rail, catching me by the hand also and dragging me with them. ‘Quick, down! I’ll steady the rope.’

‘I’ll follow after *you*,’ she said.

He raged: ‘For God’s sake, you know I can’t go, I can’t leave my ship, I couldn’t leave these men, helpless

‘We can’t save them. We couldn’t get them down to the boat, she wouldn’t hold so many, anyway, not in this condition, out of their own control. And they’ve brought it on themselves.’

He did not say that it was *she* who had brought it upon them, inciting them to broach a barrel, deceiving them into the madness of drinking the stuff... ‘A Captain can’t leave his ship.’

‘Oh, nonsense to that! What’s some foolish tradition against your life and mine? For—’ She looked him steadily in the face, I never saw anyone so much unafraid, ‘if you die, I die too.’

He caught her up, flung her across the deck rail, straddling it. ‘Drop down into the boat! Get your hands to the rope and lower yourself down!’

She hung there, balanced, with only his handhold to save her. ‘If I go, it will be after *you*.’

‘Go!’ he shouted. ‘Go! Go, or I’ll throw you down.’

They were strong those two; matching each other in strength. For a moment I thought he might really have done it, tumbling her into the little, rocking boat, risking whatever injury might come to her. But, straddled across the rail, she released her own hold of it, reached up with a swift movement and caught him by the hair. ‘If you will come with me, my Samson,’ she said, ‘you may throw me down.’

The terrible moments ticked by. I implored: ‘Time’s

running out. We shall all be destroyed—'

She let go her grip on his hair, with a huge effort hauled herself up from the rail, threw her arms about his neck and fastened her mouth upon his; a moment later she had released her hold and, with a backward movement, deliberately missing the boat just below them, flung herself away from him, down, down, down, into the glittering dark water—and out of sight.

He waited only to tear off his jacket, then he leapt up, balanced a moment on the rail and dived in after her.

Terror for them gave me what fear for myself had not—strength to climb over the rail, catch at the rope and, clinging to it as it swayed sickeningly, bruising me against the side of the ship, somehow slither down it; with one free foot I kicked out till I found the prow of the boat, dragged it towards me, felt it beneath me and tumbled in. By the time I came there, her head was above water and she was moving towards me, one arm paddling, the other somehow holding him half out of the water. She gasped: 'Help me! Help me!'

Did he, in falling, strike his head? Was there a push from above as he balanced for the dive? Did she herself...? I shall never know. He seemed, at any rate, hardly conscious as she dragged him to the side of the yawl furthest from the hull of the brig and gasped to me, spluttering: 'Hold him! Try to lift him!' I caught at him under the armpits but his weight was dragging me down after him, into the water; and I released my hold and kicking about blindly in the half-darkness, somehow wedged my foot beneath the board that ran across the beam, by way of a rowing seat, and so, straining over the side, got hold of him again and she, clinging to the gunwales of the boat with one hand, with

the other lifted and pushed until at last we had him balanced on the rim and tumbling in a senseless heap across the seat. The yawl rocked and lurched, we shipped water, I hauled him to lie in the bottom and turned back to where she now clung with both hands to the gunwale. I jammed my foot again beneath the seat to give me purchase and, feeling that my arms must be wrenched out of their sockets, at last hauled her in after him. She fell across his body, gasping and spent; raised herself at last, looked down upon his face, so white now in the starlight, framed in the wet, dark hair; and took it between her hands and kissed the parted lips. I thought that it was as though Salome cradled in her arms the severed head of the Baptist.

I said: 'You have killed him.'

'I've saved him,' she said. 'How else could we have got him away from the ship?'

Aboard the brig, all was silence, but for raucous singing and a shout of loud laughter now and again as the men came out of their torpor, only, I suppose, to relapse again. 'Cast off!' she cried to me. 'We must get free of the ship.' And as I huddled, helpless, stupefied, she insisted, 'The rope, tied to the forepeak there, unfasten the knot, leave the rope hanging, we must get away from the ship!'

I began stupidly to crawl forward. But some sense came back to me. 'Richardson!' I said. 'He's still up there on the deck, he's helpless

'And so are we,' she said. 'Helpless to do anything for him. Cast off, for God's sake and let's get away!'

'Richardson's done nothing. He's been loyal all through. We can't leave him

'Will you climb back up the rope then,' she cried to me, almost screaming, 'and carry him down? We can do nothing for him, unknot the rope, you stupid little fool and let's get

away...!' She had been stripping off her petticoats, standing rocking in the little, rocking boat, dabbling linen in sea-water, bathing his head where a little blood, I think, was flowing. Now she bundled up the lot, put the bundle beneath his head as a pillow and, frantically clambering over the intervening seats, past the mast which was lowered, lying along the body of the boat, she came to where I crouched, shoved me roughly aside and herself leaned over and Wrestled with the knot, made tight by immersion in the salt water; and while I still sat, sick with horror at the thought of getting ourselves clear away and leaving that good man lying insensible up there, she was back and had caught up an oar, fixed it into a rowlock, thrust me violently into position on the wooden seat and cried, 'Row! Wait till I tell you and then row, we must row away from the ship, he told us to row away...' As she flung herself down beside me, catching up an oar also, wrestling it into its rowlock, all in the half darkness, she flung at me: 'At least you know how to row?'

A little. My brothers, impatient as ever with my ineptitudes, had taught me that much. Hunched, weeping, guilty, terrified, I took both hands to the oar and we slid away slowly and painfully forcing the heavy boat through the gently heaving waters, turning our heads fearfully to look back to where the brig rocked gently, ever further behind us.

After the terrible climb down the rope, the scramble into the boat, the effort of hauling him in, and her after him —my whole body seemed one exhausted mass of pain. My hands clutched at the hard round of the oar, too big for my fingers to hold it with comfort and strength; I could not get into rhythm with her strong even strokes, she turned and cursed me as the craft veered this way and that. Even after

all she had been through, her spirit still rose indomitable: borne up, I could only suppose by her triumph in snatching him from the jaws of death... What he would say when he came to his senses and found the ship gone, and himself, alone out of all his men, safe—I dared not guess; nor what was to become of us, afloat on this limitless expanse of ocean. It was dark and cold; I shivered I think as much from the one as from the other.

She stopped rowing at last; leaning, even she, exhausted, across her oar. The ship still gently afloat was barely discernible—at least far enough out of danger's way. She said, 'Rest. Let the boat drift. No harm can come to us now,' and went and knelt down by my husband's side as he lay, motionless, his head kept out of the slopping of water, by her bunched-up petticoats. It seemed to both of us natural that she should go to him—not I; it almost appeared temerity in me to ask of another woman, about my own husband: 'How does he seem?'

'It's nothing,' she said. 'A knock on the head: nothing serious. And thank goodness for it—he'd never have let us row him away.'

'And rightly,' I said. 'With his men still in danger in the ship.'

'We could do nothing to help them. What's the point of all dying, when some may be saved?'

'I feel sick to think of Richardson, lying there.'

'He'll know nothing. He's like a man who dies in his sleep.' She was groping about her in the darkness. 'Is there something we could bale out this water with? I don't like him lying in the wet.'

I said nothing. Found a can, kept there for the purpose, I suppose, and began dully to scrape up the water from the bottom of the boat and tip it back into the sea. She sat in

her bedraggled dress, the wet skirts clinging to her without her petticoats to hold them stiffly out, and lifted his head into her lap, tenderly bathing his face and head with the torn linen, pushing back his black hair. I thought that she made a Rembrandt picture, curled up there with only his white face clear in the starlight and her bright hair, lit to gold. She was all the arts, Honey Mary, rolled into one: she was Beethoven, crashing with chords of thunder, she was Chopin so light and graceful, she was the charm and life and gaiety of a waltz by Strauss; she was Rembrandt in darkness and brilliance, she was Michelangelo in the firmness and strength of her beautiful body. And all poetry... *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, I thought; and I remembered the long, long poem of the Ancient Mariner and looked across at Honey Mary who had been so ever-sweet and saw her as in a broken mirror for what she was now—‘Her lips were red, her looks were free, Her locks were yellow as gold; Her skin was white as leprosy, The nightmare Life-in-Death was she, Who thickens men’s blood with cold...’ *My blood*, I know, ran cold to see her crouched there, with my husband’s head in her arms and her lips against his forehead, cradling his head against her white breast; and the gold cross glittering which had brought us to so much ruin. The little boat heaved softly to and fro. When my task was done, I crept to the stern and huddled there and out of exhaustion, slept. No commotion came from the ship to awaken me. No explosion. No tongues of flame. We lay there till dawn, too worn out to know or care. With the dawn I woke and stirred, stiff with cold. She crouched there still, lying back against the side of the boat but with his head still in her lap. But she was awake. She said: ‘Well—you see?’

I turned my head and looked where she pointed. The

Mary Celeste lay gently rocking where we had left her—a little further on, perhaps, with the light breeze into her sails. But with no harm come to her. Intact.

Her voice and movement I suppose awakened him from a deep sleep which had succeeded the first insensibility. He began to stir, to come to life. I made no move to go to him. I knew by now that, though he might not yet know it himself, he would rather have this woman with him than his wife.

She cradled him, murmuring endearments, bringing him gently to full wakefulness. But he sat up suddenly, thrusting her aside: got to his knees, with bleared eyes stared about him, stared at the ship still safely afloat. ‘Great God!’ he said. ‘She’s unharmed. And I deserted her.’

‘You were tricked,’ I said.

‘Tricked?’

She sat now, curled like a great, golden cat, running her fingers as a comb through the sea-drenched tangle of her hair, licking a finger to smooth the tawny line of her eyebrows, biting her lips to redden them, to bring herself back to her full beauty in his eyes. She said: ‘That must be it —they tricked you. There was no fuse.’

‘*She* tricked you,’ I said. ‘You saw the fuse. She tricked you into leaving your ship.’

He said not a word; only picked up the oars and began with all his returning strength to row back towards the brig.

A rope ladder had been let down now, to where the yawl might tie up. The brig was under way, only very slightly, but slowly moving on; it made it the more difficult to catch up with her—Mary caught up an oar and rowed with him—and to ascend to the deck. He went first, dragging me after him, she last. He motioned us to stand a little aside, and so faced the men.

Some sense had returned to the crew—they were sick

and fouled by their excesses, the deck was running with filth, but they were on their feet, propped against the rails or standing erect—but ready to meet him. Richardson was at their head. His face, usually so honest and kind, now beneath the weather-beaten tan was pale with rage. He said: ‘So—the danger being over, the Captain returns to his ship?’

‘Nothing has happened to her,’ my husband said, one hand to his head, still half dazed.

‘No thanks to her master if it hasn’t!’

‘I’ve been all night unconscious,’ he said. ‘I was tricked.’

Gilling came forward. He stood beside the first mate. ‘And not for the first time,’ he said. He mimicked his own last night’s words. ‘Oh, sir, I’ve thrown in a fuse, we shall all be blown to pieces!’ He waited for no questioning. ‘A fuse unlit,’ he said. ‘To see whether we were led by a man or by some puppet on a harlot’s string. And that discovery soon made. The Captain deserts his ship with the women, leaves his crew to perish—’

‘What disloyalty did I ever show to *you*,’ said Richardson, ‘that you should leave me, lying unconscious on the deck to be blown sky high with the rest?’

The men lolled, staring, still sick, speechless but with sneering faces, insolent. ‘He’s right,’ said Gilling. ‘He stood by you throughout. He braved us all, for you. He went down and searched among the cargo, till the fumes took hold of him. And you left him lying, helpless, to die.’

My husband said again, but humbly: ‘I was tricked.’

‘You were bewitched,’ said Gilling. ‘She called to you and you went with her. You left your ship to sink to the bottom and your men to die.’ He looked round the circle of tense, brutish faces, silently watching them. ‘Very well.’ He stood a little *j* aside, making way for Richardson. ‘The men

will tell you who is their Captain now.'

'*I'll* tell them that,' said my husband. He drew himself up, he spoke again like a man. 'I am your Captain, now and till I bring you ashore in Portugal and—unless from this moment you take my orders—clap you all into gaol for mutiny at sea.'

Gilling had stood all this time with his hand to his side. I saw now that he concealed a cutlass there. He took a forward step.

My husband's jacket lay where he had tossed it before he dived overboard. With one swift movement, Mary had lifted it, felt in the pocket—and the pistol was in my husband's hand.

The man lunged forward; my husband lifted the gun and shot him through the head. The cutlass fell with a clatter to the deck.

CHAPTER XII

MY HUSBAND HAD STOOD there, strong but humbled in face of the men's accusations. Now she went to him and stood at his shoulder, as though with her own body to defend him, her brazen curls against his cheek and—I hear now the clatter of that sword falling to the wooden deck—a change seemed to come over him. It was as though, having spilt blood, some scent of it reached his nostrils, as though the beast in him, long too close caged up, broke through its bars. The German, Martens, stumbled forward: he had a hatchet in his hand—they were all in some sort armed, now I saw, in preparation for outright mutiny—and threw it. It missed and embedded itself in the wooden rail of the deck. My husband waited for no further attack but shot again; and again his nostrils flared and his eye gleamed black and bright with the glare of an animal rapacity for its prey; and he laid about him, shifting the pistol to his left hand, snatching the hatchet from the rail, laying about him with that. The men fell back. Martens had only a flesh wound in the arm and staggered back with them. But Richardson caught up the cutlass from the deck and confronted his Captain. 'You're mad! Drop the gun! You're mad!'

All about us the wide, calm sea. The ship, unattended, softly moving forward, veering a little this way and that as the light breeze caught her sails. The swish and slap of the water, very soft against the gently moving hull. Bitter chill, bitter chill, but the sun slowly rising over the rim of the ocean. The decks so smooth and white with their in-curving rims of dark caulking, recently scrubbed and holystoned, now running with filth; and among all the filth a puddle of

scarlet with a man lying dead in it. I ran to my husband, I caught him by the left arm, I cried, ‘Yes, yes, drop the gun! No more, no more! You’ve killed a man...’

She left his side, she ran round behind him, got me by the waist, hauled me away from him, swinging me violently round so that I tottered forward and collapsed in a tumbled heap in the stern of the vessel. ‘Leave him alone!’ she cried to me. ‘He must fight now. It’s the only way.’ She ran back to him, picked up the pistol which had dropped from his hand; felt in his pockets as he still stood confronting Richardson, found ammunition, reloaded the gun, stood beside him so that he could snatch it from her hand if he would. Richardson said: ‘Sir—you won’t fire at *me*?’ I remember still the look upon his face. He said quietly: ‘You’ve been injured, you’ve been all night insensible, you say. You’re ill, sir, you’re not in your right mind. I’ve been loyal throughout. Let me help you now.’

‘Drop that knife,’ my husband said, ‘and stand aside.’

Richardson glanced back to where the men now cowered, sick, stupid, frightened—dangerous. He said: ‘If you’ll drop your weapons, I’ll drop mine.’

‘Do as I order you,’ said my husband, ‘or I’ll have your life for it. I am Captain of this ship—’

‘Yes, you’re Captain, sir. Let me act for you—’

‘I will give you no time at all,’ said my husband, ‘to drop that cutlass from your hand.’

‘Sir—’

My husband threw the hatchet. It struck Richardson low in the shoulder, the knife fell to the deck. Mary thrust the gun into my husband’s empty hand, darted forward, picked up the hatchet, stained as it was with blood, gave it back to him. Richardson had reeled back against the deck rail, clasping his hand to the wound, the bright blood

spurting through his fingers staining all his dark jacket with crimson. My husband marched towards the huddled group of men, hatchet in one hand, pistol in the other. The two Lorenzen brothers staggered forward each armed with a belaying pin; my husband, with the back of the hatchet, clubbed Volk to the ground. Boz, cringing back with Martens, Goodschaad and the boy, cried out, 'Enough, sir! Enough!' and pulled out some filthy white rag in token of subjection.

He backed away, not trusting them. He came to Richardson, half hanging over the rail, the blood still boiling out from the wound. He said: 'You too? Surrender?'

Richardson looked back at him with bleared, blank eyes. Mary picked up the blood-stained cutlass from beside him and flung it aside. I went to him and lowered him gently to the deck, bunched my skirts in my hand and held them close against his shoulder to try to staunch the bleeding. But she...

She went to my husband, stood directly before him, wound her arms about him. I saw the gleam of the gold cross at her throat. *He* wore no cross of gold; but now as I saw him stand there, stiff and yet without repudiating her embrace, those other images were expunged from my mind. Not Delilah now, with the shorn head of Samson, not Salome with the head of the Baptist; not the tigress with its mate... I saw him stand there, rigid, his head turned away from her as she clung to him and I thought again of that other long torment of the seas. *Instead of the cross the Albatross around his neck was hung...*

CHAPTER XIII

NOW FOR WHAT SEEMED a long time, a silence reigned on the ship. He had shaken off her clinging, she stood by humbly while he walked to the rail and stood staring out to sea. He turned, looked up into the rigging, looked all about him to see how things were with the vessel: took command. ‘Sarah —take Richardson down to the saloon—’

‘He can’t be moved,’ I said.

‘Then get what he needs—’

‘I can’t leave him. I can’t take my hand away or the blood will flow again.’

He said impatiently: ‘Then, Mary—get what she needs for him, from then on he’s in her care.’ She slid away obediently; her skirt, still only half dry, clung, without its petticoats to her slender, curving thighs, he looked after her with a sickness in his eyes. He strode down to where the five men still crowded, backed up against the companion leading up to the poop deck. He said: ‘Which of you is fit to stand trick?’

Boz Lorenzen said, ‘I’ll take the wheel, sir.’

‘Very well. Volkert, deal with Martens’ wound. Ask...’ He would not speak her name but jerked his head towards the companion where Mary had run down to the medicine chest,—for ointment, wash the wound with fresh water, bind it up as best you can. Head, go down to the galley and make coffee for all. Then all five of you may bring water and scrubbing brushes and clean up these filthy decks...’

They looked hardly fit to stand. Volkert Lorenzen said: ‘Sir, we’re sick...’ I remembered how my husband had said to Mary that on crude alcohol men went blind, could die.

He said only: 'Whose fault is that? Get on with your orders!' The sails were filling out gently with the breeze; he looked up and I knew that he wondered how he should manage if it became necessary to send anyone up the rigging. He moved about the ship, looking her over, reading instruments; when Mary returned—and not until then—went down to the cabin and I suppose consulted his charts. They say that a slate was found with that day's date and the time of 8.00 a.m. on it, with the latitude and longitude: south of the Azores, six miles distant from their most easterly island of Santa Maria. It was to be the last entry he made; he never entered the notes in the log, nor indeed touched the log again.

Richardson's wound was very bad. I made him as comfortable as I might, lying on the deck—calling to the men to swab first all round where he lay. Mary had brought a pillow and a rug from the cabin. She helped me—none too tenderly, I thought—to free his arm from the rough dark jacket and now I could find the exact situation of the wound, the hatchet having cut in deep and wide, impeded from doing even greater damage by the thickness of the coat sleeve; I exerted all the pressure that I could, with dampened cloths. In all my life I had never done such work; as in everything done with my hands, I was clumsy and inept, I daresay, but he looked up at me out of his blur of half-consciousness and said, 'You are so sweet!' In all my life, no such words had ever been spoken to me before. If there is left in me any remnant of the heart I once had—I treasure them there. 'You are so sweet!' The kindest words, almost the only kind words, ever spoken to me by any woman or any man. Mary, yes, in the days now gone; but always only out of pity. I know that in Richardson—as the blood welled up from his severed artery, so those words

welled up out of his blurred consciousness, from gratitude and love.

I had given no thought to my appearance—damp, draggled, my hands rubbed raw by the work at the oars, my hair all unloosed and hanging in dank strands about my face; and, if I had had time to think of it, shaking from the cold. But Mary... In her few minutes while she went through the medicine chest, she had found time evidently to dart into her cabin, comb out her hair, wash her hands, mop over her face. Now, duty done, she retired completely for half an hour or more: returned as groomed and exquisite as ever I had seen her, in a different dress, a dress of a clear, bright pink, with the inevitable scrolls of white; with her creamy bosoms thrusting up from the blue-white of the lacy bodice, hair set to perfection, the damp locks drying into their orderly disorder of curls. Her little pink boots picked their way delicately through the filth which the men languidly swabbed away, now and then tumbling forward over their scrubbing brushes as though they had not strength to remain on all fours. Every time a man fell, my husband would cry out a rough command; and, shuddering, they would pull themselves together again. The boy, Head, said at last, clambering to his feet and staggering forward, hands flung out for mercy, ‘Sir—my eyes are all stinging and misty, I can’t see.’

‘Whose fault is that?’ said my husband. ‘Get back to your work.’

I looked up from my task and saw that the eyes were terribly red, the eyelids inflamed. I said: ‘I can leave Richardson now for a moment. If I could bathe his eyes—’

‘Leave him alone,’ said my husband, ‘to get on with his work.’

‘I can’t see,’ said the boy. ‘I can’t see to do the work.’

‘Then feel your way about,’ said my husband. ‘If you’re blind—you blinded yourself. If there’s filth to clear up—you created the filth. Get on with it!’

‘You’re ill, sir,’ Richardson had said to him. ‘You’re not in your right mind.’ I think now that my husband *was* in his right mind, that this was his right mind and had been all along: that mind and body, his passions were violent and cruel and now at last were given rein: that out of his belief in a God of vengeance he had battened them down, but now had freed himself of those shackles and gloried in his violence.

And she also: whose childhood had been spent in the ever-present threat of violence which, in her perverted passion for her own father, she craved: and now found in a substitute, a man perhaps not much less than her father’s age when first those sick longings had been aroused in her. She gave the boy no glance of compassion, came, stepping so delicately in her pink dress, honey hair shining, to my husband’s side. They stood there—a splendid and a terrible pair: he dark, saturnine, black-eyed, black-haired with the short, jutting beard—she with her beautiful body and her beautiful face, with the tumble of dark gold curls and the bright gold cross at her throat.

Martens came up from the fore deckhouse, his arm in a sling. My husband called to him sharply. ‘Where have you been?’

‘I voss lyink on de bunk, sir, to recover.’

‘To recover from what? A flesh wound in your arm? You contributed to this filth. Get down on your knees and help to clear it up.’

‘Yessir,’ said the man. He hesitated. ‘De men is askink—what now, sir?’

‘Now you work like galley slaves, having reduced your

number and your strength by your own wicked folly, to help bring the ship eight hundred miles more, to land. And there you go to gaol for mutiny.'

Gilling's body still lay where it had fallen. There was not strength among them all, to lift the dead weight of it and I, sickened and horrified, was nevertheless too much occupied in my task of saving the yet living, to care too much about the pitiful dead. Now Martens glanced towards it. He said: 'You killed him—'

'He attacked me,' said my husband. 'As you did also. You attacked your Captain with weapons.'

'Our Captain had deserted his ship,' the man said, sullenly; but regretted his temerity immediately and slunk away back to where the men mopped and scrubbed, and with his one good arm made a feeble attempt to work also. Mary said, low-voiced: 'If they talk like that ashore—that could be dangerous.'

'They attacked their Captain,' he said briefly.

'You see what they'll say—that you had deserted them. You weren't fitted to lead them any longer. That'll be their story.'

'I shall have a story to answer it,' he said.

I stood up. My childhood. I suppose, rose up in me then—that strict, deeply religious upbringing and the lessons I had learned at the knee of a straight, stern, narrow and godly man—of rightness and wrong, of truth and untruth, of heaven and hell. If my husband lived on with no penance on this earth for his sins, he would die condemned to hell for all eternity. I said: 'I shall have a story also. I shall tell all the truth.'

They turned upon me looks of blank astonishment. Mary said: 'You would condemn him to death!'

'Better to die in repentance than live with the

wickedness that's in him now.'

'For God's sake!' she said. 'You wouldn't do this?'

'For God's sake,' I said, 'I would. And for his sake, to save him from God's wrath.'

He stood absolutely silent, staring at me with those black eyes of his; and in his face I could read nothing. But she—she came at me, running at me across the deck, leaping over the outflung arm of the dead body lying there; and in a moment I think would have had me by the throat. But he came after her and pulled her off me. 'Let me be!' she screamed. 'Let me kill her! Dead men tell no tales. With her out of the way...'

But he pulled her away and she fell into his arms and laid her golden head against his breast and broke into a terrible sobbing. 'She'll not harm you, she shan't harm you,' she cried, choking it out, clinging to his sleeves with clenched white hands. 'Get her out of the way!—what is she but a thing of milk and water, a miserable, half-witted creature, with her cringing little soul...' With all her magnificent physique, she was as exhausted as the rest, I suppose, by the night we had passed through and the events of that morning. He held her close in his arms, no pretences now, and she lay there and sobbed out her weary heart. I thought to myself for a moment that after all, I was the strong one now.

With bleary eyes, driving themselves into what activity they might, the men looked incredulously on.

I left them to stand there, he hushing and soothing her, and turned back to Richardson. He caught me by the hand. He pulled me close. I think all events remote from himself were now beyond his recognition. He mumbled, so that I must bend my head close to his to hear him: 'My wife ...A letter

‘You have no strength,’ I said. ‘Give me messages...’

But he only muttered and mumbled, ‘A letter... A letter...’ ‘I’ll write for you,’ I said. ‘Be patient a moment.’ I went down to the cabin, ignoring those other two, and came back with a slate and slate pencil. ‘I’ll write a message, Albert, a letter, and copy it afterwards and you shall see it. And when you are well—’

‘Write, write,’ he muttered urgently. He began to whisper it out. I wrote on the slate. ‘Fanny, my dear wife...’ and waited. He said no more and I saw that he was dead.

CHAPTER XIV

I SAT FOR A long time by Richardson's side, holding his dead hand in mine. I remembered how I had thought of him once —how long ago it seemed!—as a sort of angel, an angel of goodness, Gabriel, sword in hand, fighting off my terrors, drawing me into an aura of warmth and light that shone about him. How I had dreamed of how it might have been, had my husband been such as he: understanding and kind... It seemed a long time indeed since I had been half a child still, a woman only in a new knowledge and dread of the world—dreaming such foolish dreams. Richardson had been no angel: Honey Mary could have testified to that. But he had been kind and true, loyal to his Master; and might have been to me a friend. As I had thought once that I had no friend in the world but a waterside whore—now I knew that there had been one other; and they both were gone.

The men's work was half done, they were approaching the stern of the vessel. My husband stood with Mary, earnestly talking there. He seemed to come to a decision. He strode forward, looking down on the four of them as they crept slowly forward on hands and knees, scrubbing brushes moving almost automatically up and down the fouled boards of the deck; looking up at Boz Lorenzen on the poop deck. 'Very well. You may all rest now. I'll take over the wheel. Get down to your quarters, let the boy find you something to eat.' But as Head stumbled to his feet and, with reddened eyes, now running with pus, began to fumble his way forward, hands touching the sides of the raised roof of the fore deckhouse to guide himself, he amended, shrugging. 'Or if he can't, then another of you see to it.'

They lurched off, a scarecrow crew, supporting one another; one heard the crash and bump as they tumbled down the companion steps. He strode up to the poop deck, caught up a rope and lashed the wheel and came striding back down again. Mary had waited for him. They came and stood over me as I sat at Richardson's side. Mary said, 'He's dead?'

'Dead,' I said. 'And murdered.'

My husband said: 'He shall have burial.'

I said sadly: 'Who is left, fit to say prayers over him?'

Mary made an impatient movement. My husband said quietly: 'Stand up, Sarah. It's necessary that we talk about this.' I clambered up with a hand on the deck rail, stiff with cold and weariness, and confronted them. 'What is there to say?'

'The men mustn't see him, Sarah,' said Mary. 'There will be worse trouble if they know that he's gone.'

'The men not know that he's killed?'

'While they're below, we'll pretend to have taken him down to the saloon, to be nursing him in his own cabin there. No secret that he's wounded; they all know that. But we daren't let them know that he's dead.'

'Take him—? But you can't keep him dead, down there in the cabin

'I said we *must pretend*,' said Mary. But they spoke carefully now, placatingly, they were trying to nurse me into complacency—into complicity. My husband said: 'I said he must have burial, Sarah. Every sailor faces burial at sea.'

'But how can we keep such a burial from the men?'

'Oh, Sarah!' said Mary, losing her careful patience. 'There's no *time* for formalities, for wrappings up in canvas —'

I cried out to my husband: 'You won't simply throw him into the sea?'

‘He shall have prayers,’ he said. He glanced over his shoulder as though fearful that at any moment the men might come staggering back and catch them at their work. ‘Come, Sarah, what else matters? He’s dead, what does he care now for ceremonial?’ He caught me by the arm, pulled me to kneel down with him over the poor, blood-stained body. ‘Pray with me, pray the prayers for the soul departed —’

‘I’ll pray for the soul departed,’ I said savagely, ‘and it will be yours. For I think it’s no longer in your own keeping.’

He only said, rather wearily: ‘I’m fighting now for our lives.’

‘And our lives are in danger already and far more so if we spend more time arguing over this,’ said Mary. ‘Say your prayers, for God’s sake, for whom or what you will; and drop him over the side.’

I knelt close to him, bitterly weeping. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I said to his poor, dead, upturned face, ‘I’m so sorry.’ What did it matter to him, they had said, now that he was dead; but to bundle him over the side like a load of jettisoned ballast... ‘No one shall pray for you,’ I said to his dead face, ‘except myself. You shall not be—desecrated—by the Godless prayers of your murderer.’ And I bent and kissed his forehead and commended his soul to God and made him a promise that never was to be kept. Your Frances shall have your last message. She shall know you died thinking of her.’ I got up and stood aside, turning away my head, the tears flowing down my face. My husband said briefly: Can you bear it?’ and without a word she stooped and lifted the limp, sprawled legs and my husband I suppose took the shoulders, for I would not watch; and grunting with the struggle, they lifted him to the level of the rail; and there

was a splash, and silence.

I think they were not unaffected by the doing of it; they were silent, standing with dropped hands and hanging heads. She rallied first. She said: 'I daresay that for this other, we had better do it all in style?'

'It will keep their minds occupied,' he said.

She put her hand to where the blue bruise showed through the dark hair, fallen forward over his dark face with the effort and the strain. She said: 'Won't you eat something now and rest a little? I'll fetch food from the galley?'

The sun was high in the heaven now, the cold winter sun that seemed to do nothing to alleviate the chill that went through to the very marrow of one's bones. He said: 'We should all three rest and try to eat. Some coffee...?' She turned and went forward, swinging her way down the new washed decks with a swish of her frilly pink skirts, tapping her way on the heels of her little pink boots. She who had been so insouciant and gay in life and love, was insouciant also it seemed in the face of death. I stood at the rail and watched in horror as the body rose up through the splash of its falling, and drifted slowly astern. He took me by the arm and half dragged me down the companion-way and to the door of my cabin. 'Go in, Sarah,' he said, 'and clean yourself and tidy yourself. It's easier to face life when one's under one's own command.'

'Are you under your own command?' I said.

'Oh, dear God!' He closed his eyes as though he could bear no more reproach from me, no more harping on a theme that now he felt unable to contemplate. He made no answer. I went into my cabin and closed the door.

I poured water and washed what was left of poor Richardson's blood from my hands; washed my face and my

body, moving stiffly from the long exposure to the cold; rinsed the salt water from my hair and combed it out to dry; put on clean underlinen. Mary called at the door and I went to it and took in a mug of coffee; she had put a lot of sugar in it which I think was wise. My mirror was opposite me as I stood drinking and I stared with something like stupefaction into the face that looked back into mine. Deathly white with the long strands of hair, darkened with the wetness to a heavy auburn, hanging all about my shoulders; eyes like two holes burnt into the white, smudged round with deep shadows. My arms and hands were bruised, fingers blistered with the effort of rowing, nails rough and broken. But what was all that? I stood there, staring back at myself: a girl, a young girl, whose worst experience in my whole life till now, had been the cringing terror of some small social event where everyone would be more clever, talented, and assured than I. And now... The husband into whose care I had been surrendered for the rest of my life to come, was translated to a monster, half mad with passion for a waterfront harlot; cruel, brutal, twice over a murderer. Two men were dead, four were half crazed with the effects of crude alcohol and in the saner parts of their minds, doubtless plotting to murder us all—to kill him before he should kill *them*: to kill us two women who might inform against them. A monstrous deception was being practised against them, in the concealment of Richardson's death; and with it all, if no more harm should come—what next? The Captain would have his tale to tell: of the smuggling of the woman aboard—how would they two contrive that story alone, and somehow conceal their mutual passion so that anyone might believe it?—the broaching of the alcohol: the men, driven out of their senses, attacking their Captain, the chief mate Richardson included; the acts of self-defence...

Denial of the story that the men would recount, of their master's desertion of his ship; (so incapacitated had they been, indeed, that none would have observed the circumstances of its coming about and doubtless they all believed that their Captain had indeed committed the unforgivable sin). Only one obstacle to be dealt with then—once he had, with the aid of a blinded boy and four half mad and bitterly belligerent German seamen, somehow brought his brigantine eight hundred miles to landfall in Portugal—only one obstacle. A young girl who stood strong as a rod of silver in her knowledge of her duty: her duty to God, her duty to the truth, her duty to the salvation of her husband's soul.

Only one obstacle. If he were to be believed, and the men not, then my husband would go free, a hero of the seas; and those men, whose real crime had been the broaching of a keg of liquor, would face long imprisonment or even death. Would I permit that? They knew that I would not—he and Mary. Moreover... To any Hope that he should at last, all danger past, meet with her again and ally himself to her in some part of the world where her story would be unknown—only one obstacle. I looked back into the deathly white face in the mirror with the burnt black holes of eyes—and went to the bed and there knelt down and prayed. How long I prayed, what prayers I said, whether they were for myself or for him—they have been ever since for *him*—I could not tell you now. At some time I must have climbed on to the bunk and there fallen into a sleep that was almost insensibility. When at last I awoke, it was afternoon.

I went back to that terrible mirror: combed out my hair and without haste did it up in its usual way, the smooth bands divided out and then wound and crossed about my small head, very smooth and indeed, as I look back upon

that young creature that I then was, very beautiful, palely gleaming. I put on my sepia dress and found that the hands that fastened the innumerable hooks and eyes might be clumsy with their long, inept fingers, but were not trembling. Where my strength came from, I could not now tell you: from that long-ago stern childhood training, I suppose, and my deep faith in God. So timid and self-doubting in so many ways, yet there was something in me of a lion-heart. All my life had been a struggle to survive my own sense of inferiority; it had built up within me, perhaps, a quiet obstinacy on the rare occasions when I knew without doubting it, that I was right. I knew now that I was right and though I knew also that it might bring me to death —at Mary's hands for I believed that he would not, even as the man he was now, go as far as that—still I must take the path I believed in.

In the saloon, some food was still left on the table. I ate something, not wanting to but because I knew I must keep up my strength for God knew what troubles to come. It was still very calm; I think even that the breeze had dropped again. The decks were clean now: the scrubbing done, they had hauled up buckets of sea water and sluiced them down. No sign remained of Richardson's blood. A canvas was spread in the stern and Gilling had been laid out decently upon it. My husband was even now supervising the wrapping of the canvas around him, and fastening of ropes about it. Of the boy, Head, there was no sign. Volkert and Boz were doing the work, Martens trying to help with his one good arm, Goodschaad also but he seemed very ill. Martens asked me: 'How is with Mr Richardson now, Ma'am?'

Mary said quickly: 'We've told them how you've been looking after him.'

I said: 'All is well with Mr Richardson now.'

He touched his own wounded arm. 'Not too paining?'

'No pain,' I said. 'No pain.'

'But danger? Is very ill? Is danger?'

I answered as steadily as I could: 'No. He's past danger.'

An Englishman might have caught at the way I expressed it but they were Germans and I knew they would not. Volkert said, busy with ropes and wrapping, 'Is gutt. Is gutt man, Richardson,' and his brother looked up from his work and said also, 'Very gutt man.' I recalled that but a matter of hours ago it had been in their intention to put Richardson in my husband's place; nor did they look into their Captain's face as they spoke. He made no comment; said only, looking down at Gilling, 'Better leave it till nightfall to bury him.'

'Sundown,' said Martens.

'There'll be stars tonight.'

'Why not sundown?' said Martens, looking surprised. My husband said quickly: 'Very well—sundown then.'

I had never liked Gilling but it was pitiful now to see the still face disappearing for ever from the sight of man, as the last fold of the canvas covered it over. The ropes were drawn tight and knotted; he lay like a parcel awaiting disposal. The men dispersed. I said to Martens, 'How is the boy?'

He shrugged. 'Eyes very batt. Is drinking much, perhaps. We are not drinking much when we discovering not rum. Only Head and Good drinking after that: Good very ill also.' I wondered how much they recalled of the prelude to their drinking, of how she had incited them to broaching the barrel, deceived them into believing that it held rum. I think not much. She had been, in the past, boon companion to all of them, many an orgy they'd had, no doubt, in the taverns of the waterfront; to them it would be

all part of any wild escapade that sailors will indulge in ashore; though not, if they are wise, at sea. When they found out their mistake, they had stopped drinking and no doubt saved themselves terrible consequences; the boy's condition and Goodschaad's were proof enough of that. But as the day progressed, they were coming back to normality, except for Martens, whose arm seemed to get no better. They ignored Mary now; they had seen very clearly what the new situation was—she who had belonged to them all, sharing out her favours with laughing generosity, now belonged exclusively to their Captain and of him they were now very much afraid. As they went, he called out various orders to them. They muttered 'Ay ay, sir,' in the customary way; but Martens turned back and said to me: 'Ve can seeing Richardson soon?'

'Richardson is asleep,' I said. Asleep and rocking in the gentle swell of the great green grave that had taken him in.

They went. Mary stood with my husband looking after them; sleeve to sleeve, always close, like two staunch companions excluding all other loves. She said: 'You did very well, Sarah.'

'I think she wasn't over convincing,' my husband said.

'I said what I must,' I said, 'without telling any lie.'

She laughed. 'Funny little Sarah! How close she draws the distinction between deception and a lie!'

'If you don't like it,' I said, 'I'll most willingly call them back and speak the truth.'

She laughed again, clinging to my husband's arm. 'Good heavens—what a spitfire it becomes if it's teased!'

'A chained dog will bark,' I had said to him, confined to my cabin lest I speak a word with the men of his crew. Now I felt not chained but like a wild thing, running to and fro, pent up in a close confinement all set about with danger. 'A

caged creature will snap,' I said, 'if you poke at it through the bars.' I walked away from them to my old haven of the slung hammock amidships. After a little while he passed me, going to speak to Boz Lorenzen, who was working up forward. 'I shall go to my cabin for some rest,' he said to him. He jerked a thumb backwards: I think he never brought himself to naming her to the men. 'She will take care of Mr Richardson.' She will take care of *you*, no doubt, I thought in bitter repugnance as he passed back down the deck; and indeed he turned back a little and said: 'Stay where you are, Sarah. Leave us alone.' I looked back at him with cold disgust and, disconcerted perhaps, even he, even now—he said, 'After so much—I need some rest.'

'I hope you may get it,' I said.

He shrugged as if he could no longer hope, no longer cared. 'There's a great deal,' he said, 'that you can never understand.'

'That's been my experience all my life,' I said. 'But I think I'm beginning to learn.' I added: 'A little late perhaps. I haven't much time left—have I?'

'To learn?' he said.

'To live,' I answered him.

He seemed to give a great shudder, he flung back his head, squared his fine shoulders; a terrible pain came to those dark eyes of his. He said at last, 'No hurt shall come to you, Sarah. How could I lift my hand against you?'

'You needn't,' I said. 'Your other half will do it for you.'

He did not disclaim. He said only, 'No one wishes you a moment's harm—if only you will comply.'

'If to comply is to cheat and lie, perhaps condemn men to unjust punishment,' I said, 'I shall not. And you—a man of God as once you were! For your soul's sake—make confession when the time comes, tell the truth; for I tell you

now while we two are for a moment alone—I will save you, my husband, if you have no longer power to save yourself. I shall tell only the truth. If you suffer—that is your rightful atonement.'

‘It’s not for you to judge me—’

‘Is it not? After those two you’ve killed—whom have you injured most?’

‘Then judge. But it’s not for you to dictate what you call my atonement. Mind your own business!’

‘I will,’ I said. ‘And it is not part of my business to tell wicked lies.’

‘If you tell nothing but the truth, Sarah, I shall go to prison; very possibly to my death.’

‘You’ve just told me,’ I said, ‘to mind my own business.’

He went away. For a long, long time I rocked in my hammock, huddled tight in my shawl from the cold; and kept my mind resolutely away from my cabin—and my bed. What was to be the future arrangement?—was I to move into the tigress’s cage now that she was free of it?—and she occupy my room? At least, I thought, for the rest of my life, however short or long it may be—I shall sleep alone.

An hour before sundown, he reappeared and went about the business of the ship, issuing orders calmly, making careful arrangements for the apportionment of work once the wind should rise at last and the *Mary Celeste* be on her way again; with the crew so much reduced, they would have a hard time of it. He made no comment on the cause of the reduction in numbers: allowed it to be assumed that Richardson was unlikely to recover sufficiently to contribute very much during the seven or eight days that should see us to landfall. As to the boy—till the condition of his eyes improved, he had better occupy Gilling’s vacated bunk in the crew’s quarters, leaving the bunk in the galley empty, so

that the—women—might take over his work there and produce the meals. ‘While the calm lasts,’ he said, looking up into the quiet sky, ‘conserve your strength. Do what work you must; but you must be fit when we get under way again, to face the rigging. We shall be only three well men, unless Goodschaad improves and Martens’ arm mends very quickly.’ He said to Boz Lorenzen, ‘Go down and tell the boy to move his things. When we have dealt with Gilling’s burial, a meal can be prepared.’

I doubted that Gilling would have cared who prayed over him. If my husband in his wickedness chose to dissemble and speak words he was not fit to utter, let him do so. Richardson had gone without such uncleanliness to his clean, green grave. The men had tidied and cleansed themselves; Mary, hypocritical, had tied a scarf about her bright hair, even taken a dark rug from the bunk and wore it draped as a shawl about the gay pink dress. Feel for her what I might, I could not but recognise that with the fine bones of her face so closely outlined by the lifting back of her hair, she looked more beautiful than ever I had seen her with its shining glory all about her. Honey Mary, who had been so sweet and full of laughter!—whose laughter now was full of a vicious triumph, whose kindness was overriden by those new considerations that centred around her passion—her passion for the man, who, to my prescient young mind, wise perhaps long before its time—substituted for the father with the flail whose illicit love she had craved in her girlhood should be hers. Between them—she handing the pistol, he employing it—they had murdered the man whose body they now stood over with faces masked by a monstrous false piety, and he spoke the words, and the two German brothers lifted the great, flaccid parcel between them and let it slide gently over the rail and into the sea...

And cried out ‘Vot’s dat? Vot’s floating astern?’ and turned round and stared at my husband as though they would go mad and said: ‘It’s Richardson!’

He had tried to put the burial off till nightfall. ‘At sundown,’ they had suggested instead and he had not dared resist. And now, as though Banquo’s ghost, blood-bolter’d smiled upon him—my husband stood while the ghost of dead Richardson rose up out of his green grave and pointed his murdered hand. In all the terrible moments, no moment had been more terrible than that.

Mary let fall the dark cloak, untied the dark scarf, shook out her sunny hair. She stood close at my husband’s side. She said: ‘We could not bear to tell you that he was dead.’

Martens stammered, ‘He—died—?’

‘He died up here on deck,’ I said. ‘He died in my arms.’

‘You told us—’

‘I told you that he was in no pain,’ I said, ‘and that was true. I told you that he was—asleep; and that was as near to the truth as I dared to come.’

The blind boy cried: ‘You’ve seen Mr Richardson?’

‘Dead and t’rown into de sea,’ said Boz, ‘like carcase of a dog.’

‘I prayed for him,’ I said. ‘I prayed for him.’

Four pairs of eyes turned to me; the boy’s were covered now with bandages, but he also, though painfully, turned his head. Volkert said, ‘You are doing no wronk, Ma’am, never,’ and Boz, ‘Richardson vos sayink we shall protectink Mrs Briggs.’

‘Protect yourselves,’ said my husband, and the pistol was in his hand. Mary said, ‘Shoot them down! What have we to lose? A mutiny—’

‘Then shoot me too,’ I said, ‘for what you do to these

men, I shall tell to all the world.'

His pistol still trained upon them, he backed away and she with him and they conferred a long time, whispering. I said to the men, hardly believing it: 'They won't shoot you. If they do, they know I shall tell of it. And he won't harm me!'

Boz Lorenzen said: 'He said Cap'n vos mad; vos no more sane. Richardson said. Is true.'

'He won't let harm come to me,' I said again, 'and while I live, he won't harm *you*.'

'Gilling. Richardson...' Martens said. 'He vould kill *me*, but got only wounding.'

'You were all armed. You attacked him. That'll be his excuse. He won't kill you while you stand helpless. He knows I would tell of it.'

My husband came forward again, she ever at his shoulder, the gun trained on the men still. He said: 'You shall have your chance. The yawl is still afloat. I shall give you provisions, you may take her. By this morning's charting, we are no more than six miles from landfall. Once there, you may tell what story you will—I shall have my own story, we shall see who will win.'

'Six miles from land?' I said.

'Six miles. Our position is chalked on the slate below. You may check with it if you will. Then come up and help with water and provisions; bring warm clothes for them. We'll play fair.'

I rushed down to the cabin, to the chart pinned on the saloon wall; consulted the slate, worked out our position—and it was true: the island of Santa Maria, at the easternmost point of the Azores. I rushed up on deck again; ran to the galley in the fore deckhouse. Mary was there, filling canvas bags with biscuits, cooked meats, dried fruit.

She said only, 'Fill those cans with fresh water,' and staggered away up on deck with her load. When I came up with my water cans, the men were still standing, huddled together; she had been down and dumped the stuff and was scaling the swaying ladder like a monkey, easily, hand over hand; only she had kicked off the little pink boots and went barefoot. I put down the cans and ran back for warm clothes and bedding. Now they were climbing down the ladder, still with the gun trained upon them, the brothers assisting the boy with his bandaged eyes as, whimpering, he clung with unsteady hands, feeling about with his foot for the rung below; Boz returning to assist Martens with his wounded arm. They settled themselves, the Lorenzens at the oars, and within a couple of minutes were rowing away from the brig and out of gunshot range.

It seemed all very—strange. I went down again to the saloon. Santa Maria, easternmost island in the group of the Azores. I took down a book from the shelf above the charts and turned up the page. Santa Maria...

I went back to them as they stood at the rail watching the yawl which seemed moving only very slowly away from us. I said: 'You have murdered them.'

'They have only six miles,' said Mary.

I held out the book. 'Santa Maria. Nothing but solid, jagged rock, precipitous rock cliffs... It says at the bottom: "Any landing, impossible."

'It lifted the fear from their hearts,' said Mary. 'We're in the trade routes.' Her eyes consulted my husband. 'They'll be picked up eventually. They're well victualled.'

That I couldn't deny; it had surprised me a little that she should supply them so well for a journey of only six miles, for which they had two men at least, able to row; and a sail—though in so little wind, that would be not much

use.

‘But what if they’re not picked up?’

Mary said, shrugging: ‘Dead men tell no tales.’

‘Dead men—’

‘They will be picked up. They’ve got food and warm things. Come, let’s go to the galley and get something for the three of us...’

‘There *is* no “three of us”,’ I said. ‘There’s you two—and me. You two get food and eat. I’ll stay by myself.’

She said impatiently: ‘Come down to the galley, I say!’ and glanced at my husband, I thought uneasily. ‘Tell the silly little fool to behave herself,’ she said.

‘Yes, go now—’ But he stopped and cried out suddenly: ‘What’s happening?’ and pointed out to sea.

The men were standing up in the boat—floundering about, tipping her dangerously this way and that. One of them stripped off his coat and dived overboard, clinging to the gunwales. My husband said, staring: ‘Why’s he done that?’ and then, ‘To lighten her? What’s wrong with her?’ I said: ‘Dear God!—she’s sinking.’

She was sinking. We could hear, faintly, their cries, the boy’s high voice screaming out in terror as, blinded, he stumbled about in the boat as she settled lower and lower in the water. He could find no purchase anywhere, tripped over one of the seats, I suppose, and went sprawling. The others were trying to haul him to his feet, I could discern his movements and thought that he tried to tear the bandages aside from his eyes. Through the gathering dark, we could see that one man, Volkert Lorenzen, I suppose, or Goodschaad, since he used both arms, was waving to us wildly; across the waters his voice came dimly, hollering for help. But even as he stood there rocking, the boy stumbled once more and pitched over the side. I screamed out. I

cried, ‘She’s sinking, what can be done?’ and my husband also said, ‘She’s going! They’ll drown. What can we do?’

Mary said coolly: ‘Let them swim.’

Who ever knew a sailor that could swim? ‘They can’t swim,’ I cried. ‘And where can they swim to? They couldn’t make it back so far as this.’

That blackness again, that almost mist of horror! I seized my husband’s arm. ‘They’re injured... The boy can’t see. And Marten’s arm!’ And I cried out again in horror, ‘They’ll drown! They’ll drown!’

‘Let them drown,’ said Mary. ‘Dead men tell no tales.’

I think then that my husband did glance at her with a look of something like terror. He was trying to kick off his deck shoes, wrenching off his heavy jacket. She clung to him, impeding him. ‘For God’s sake—what are you going to do?’

‘Swim out to them,’ he said.

Now it was her turn to cry out in fear, imploring him. ‘You’ll never swim so far! And if you get to them... What can you do for them?—you can’t help them, men floundering, one sick and two of them injured.’ And as he persisted in his efforts to get his arms out of the jacket, she clinging to him, she repeated, hammering with her small hard fist at his shoulder as though to drive through the message into his very flesh, ‘Let them drown! Without them, we’re safe.’ And again, ‘Dead men tell no tales.’

Sick, haggard, he looked back into her upturned, imploring face. ‘Oh, Mary—’ he said. Was it a question that he asked of her then? Was it a horrified repudiation of what the answer to that question might be? In this matter, at least, I think that my husband was innocent. At any rate, as she clung, impeding him, he thrust her aside, violently, so that she almost toppled back away from him, and fell

sprawling on the deck. 'I had better try at any rate,' he said, stooping to peel off his deck shoes, and to me, 'Include this at least when to save your precious soul, you tell your murderous truths,' and he leapt to the deck rail and balancing there for a moment, dived into the sea and began to swim strongly out to the boat. She had staggered to her feet a moment too late to stop him; and now at once tore off the pink dress and the froth of white petticoats below and, in her white frilled knickers and bodice, dived in after him.

Impotent, frightened, foolish, I clung to the rail staring after them into the darkening evening, her white arms flashing up out of the water as with strong overarm strokes—and she a woman—she cut through the swirling dark green of the wave-less sea. When I raised my eyes again to the boat, I saw that it was turned turtle, bottom up. I think now that the two brothers took on each one of the injured men: one trying to support the blinded boy who threshed about horribly screaming, the other supporting Martens with his one helpless arm. Since none could swim, quite simply they died together, two pairs, the helpless dragging down those who might possibly have paddled themselves afloat or with arms free, clung to the upturned boat. As it was—by the time my husband came there, exhausted no doubt by the long swim through the icy water—the men were gone. I saw that he swam about the boat, as though searching; turned, hopeless, and swam back to Mary lest she needed his aid. But not she!—I saw that he merely turned and swam alongside her till they came to the yawl and clung there, spent but safe.

The grey mist, the blackness; I was falling, falling... All gone, all dead—seven of them who but a matter of hours ago had been fine, strong, decent men—all gone. Women to

mourn who would never know their fate: would be taught to believe that they had died in the course of wrong-doing, of violence and mutiny; children left fatherless whose names would bear always that stigma of shame. That a man in port, after long voyage or before, should relieve his man's passions in the body of a paid woman, need not mean that he could not love and cherish his own and be loved and cherished in return. Richardson with his Frances—Volkert Lorenzen with a wife and three children, Boz leaving a child in two senses fatherless... Gilling I knew had no wife or children, but was yet a mother's son. Even poor Head, though we treated him as a boy and referred to him seldom by any other name, was in fact twenty-three years of age and just before sailing had found some young girl, foolish enough (one must admit) to marry him. He would boast of it among the men but they hardly believed it, teasing him about his pretended married state; but I think it was true. Of Martens I knew nothing nor of Goodschaad; but all sailors acquire wives in one port or another and go back between voyages to 'home'. Now there were seven who would never go home again. I wished that I too might die: what home had I now? And I thought it would not be long. By this last stroke of what I supposed they would call their luck, my husband and his woman were freed of the last threat to their safety—except for me. I thought it was true that he wouldn't harm me. Somewhere perhaps, in the deeps of his consciousness, at the back of his soul, was the unrecognised hope that in me at last lay his salvation; that if he could not save himself, I would. But she... She was strong and lithe and all my small spirit was ebbing away out of me. Some story to be told him of my losing my will to live—and a lift and a twist... And all about us, the shark dark waters, the shark dark depths beneath the glassy green sea where seven

men now floated, a hideous bait. She will kill me, I thought and wondered if, the work done for him, he would wash his hands of my blood. 'The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she...'

The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she, who thickens men's blood with cold. Would she spare my blood who had spilt so much and exulted in it as though she were indeed the tigress, who had tasted the flesh of man? There seemed a madness upon her; I think that in those last terrible days they were both unsound in their minds, driven on by some horror long hidden within them, and now released, acting each upon the other—she craving his mastery as, sick, she had craved the illicit mastery of her own father; he crazed with the release of tendencies natural to him, kept too long under his own subjection. Separate, they might have survived; together it was as though the alcohol in the hold had indeed been ignited by a lighted fuse and inferno reigned. She will kill me, I thought, whether he wills it or no.

When I came to, it was almost dark and he was climbing up the rope ladder, back to the deck. Somehow they had pushed and paddled the heavy boat back to the brig and tethered her to her mooring close to the stern. He gasped out, 'A lantern!' and I struggled up and fetched one and lit it, and he went down the ladder again to assist her up. As he held the lamp above his head to allow her to clamber from the hull of the yawl to the ladder, it fell upon the upturned bottom of the boat.

Their luck, did I say? I recalled how she had gone down first with the bags of food, while I still worked in the galley and my husband stood guard over the men... When she came to the rail and, exhausted, tumbled over and stood clinging to it, a ghost in the darkness, wet under-clothes clinging close to her body, dank hair all about the pale,

beautiful face, I confronted her, speechless. She made no denial of the unspoken accusation. She said simply, yet once again, 'Dead men tell no tales.'

CHAPTER XV

I THINK THAT FOR some days after this, I was very ill. I know that I stumbled down to the saloon, went into Richardson's cabin and, not caring who had slept there before me and with whom—fell on the bunk, dragged up the covers over me and there lay huddled till sleep came to me at last. When I awoke, I knew that I had a fever. The long night in the yawl had chilled me through to my bones, I had not changed my clothes when I got back to the ship but stayed up on deck with Richardson. I had drunk a little coffee, eaten practically nothing; lived in a condition of perpetual terror and shock. Now I was burning hot and heavily perspiring, yet shivering as though I were cold. I dragged myself through to the main cabin, regardless of its present occupation, tried, unsteadily standing at the wash-table, to sluice myself down with cold water. The calm was evidently over, the winds had meanwhile freshened, the ship was in motion. I cared for nothing; drank some water from the ewer, dropped the damp towels to the floor and feeling my way along the walls and through the sliding doorway, fell back on to the bunk in Richardson's cupboard-room.

Later I knew that Mary came to me. I opened dull eyes and saw her face bending over me but I was dead to all caring. She went away, brought water and cloths, bathed my face and hands and sweating body—I recognised dimly that I wore a nightgown now and no longer the clothes in which I had thrown myself down; so she must have been with me before. Deft, strong, ever capable, she moved me to one end of the bed so that she might draw out the soaking sheet and replace it, put new covers on the pillows, laid me

down and covered me with a clean sheet and packed me in with blankets. She had brought fresh water with her, very cold, and I drank at it thirstily and fell back again. All the while she murmured half endearments, ‘Poor Sarah! Poor girl! There now, lie comfortably!’ but no words passed between us. I think I could hardly have spoken to be understood, and indeed hardly knew where I was nor what had happened to bring me there. She left me and I dozed off, and woke again and dozed again... Many times I know that she returned, bringing me fresh water, trying to tempt me to eat. No conversation passed between us: none—only those murmured kindnesses, the tenderest attention, the most scrupulous care. As I came slowly back to health, the thought came to me that if there had been a time to kill me, surely it would have been now; but nothing was spared that would bring me back to life.

How they had managed, those two, meanwhile, I shall never know—somehow to haul up the yawl which now hung perilously, lashed to the deck rail at the stern of the ship; whatever damage she had done to it had been repaired, while, I suppose, the calm still lasted. Now we were under way, the light wind bellying out the sails which had been all set and so must surely remain until it became imperative to bring them down—for surely she was at least not fit to go up into the rigging, work that daunts many a trained seaman when conditions become tricky. He had taught her to understand the steering and she now stood her trick like any man—though indeed I suppose much of all this had been familiar to her already, she had lived all her life among sailors and had in her a tomboy spirit which would lead her to enquire and attempt; under a less conscientious Captain, I daresay, and in lesser ships, she may well have been to sea before. At any rate, she appeared

now to have taken to the life as though she had lived all her days under sail, and together in perfect harmony, they worked side by side like two companionable men. Time could be spared, however, for passionate embraces, which they made no attempt to conceal; I think that by now they could not touch one another without the wild blood surging through their veins, nor forbear to touch one another every time they came close. Sick, sick—they were sick with their passion, lost in it, devoured by it. Since only they two could share the watches, through the nights I supposed they must be divided; unless he would go above and take her on the floor of the poop deck, close by the wheel; it was on the bare boards, after all, that he had first known her, 'not waiting to come to the bed.' Tiger—tigress: two beasts of the wild, untamed, uninhibited. Tiger—tigress—burning bright, In the forests of the night. By night and by day too, they burned with a fierce fire. I suppose they called it love.

CHAPTER XVI

NOW BEGAN DAYS OF a second, and stranger than ever, routine. Together they did all they could accomplish of the work of eight men. What I could add to that, I added—was fit at least to coil ropes, tie halyards, to carry and haul and keep all as far as possible shipshape; and to do the work that the cookboy and steward would have done. When I came to my senses I took to myself a resolution, much against my inclination, perhaps against my conscience but for more reason, perhaps, than the mere preservation of my life. It was my fixed resolve that, to save himself in the sight of God, my husband must do penance here on earth. If I were dead and she alone in control of him, he would lie his way out of this great trouble and continue in a life of fornication, with murder on his soul. If I were dead, who would pray for him, strive to guide him back to the paths of virtue and repentance? Their behaviour to me made it clear that they were hoping to bring me over to their side. I made up my mind that, while I would be—could not but be—unrelenting in my detestation of what had been and of their behaviour now—I would at least make no more outward declarations of my fixed intention, when the time came, to tell the truth.

All conversation between the three of us together had to be conducted on the poop deck, for someone must be at the wheel. The ship was increasingly hard to control; there had been bad weather, her sails were torn, the rigging here and there broken and hanging; if by the rigging is meant the ropes and tackle that control the sails; I have said a dozen times I know nothing of all these terms, or have forgotten

them. There had been heavy rain, everything above decks was soaked. They were both working up on deck. I took two mugs of hot coffee to them there. Mary left what she was doing and came to the poop deck. She said in the kind way that she nowadays employed to me: 'You look very tired, Sarah. All this is too much for you.'

'What I can do, I must,' I said.

'We're keeping her course fairly steady,' said my husband. 'If we can only have reasonable weather, we should make land in a week or so.'

I daresay they had made up their minds beforehand that this was the time to talk over the situation with me; had chosen it with some care. The rain had ceased, had taken with it some little decrease in the cold. She had been working—hauling off a heavy cover to get at spare parts, spare ropes I suppose or something of that kind. She wore as she now usually did, clothing left behind by the men—I had known her in heavy weather wear trousers, rolled up to the knee as *they* had been used to do—her bare legs so delicate and white, and the small white feet padding about the swamped decks; and she almost habitually wore the heavy dark serge jacket, far too large for her, turned back at the cuffs, with her narrow white wrists made all the narrower and more shapely, jutting forth from the heavy folds. Her hair would be tied back with a ribbon, carelessly: gone was the tumbled mane of curls all about her shoulders. If I could have regarded her with less than unspeakable horror, I might have seen that she looked very sweet and comic, like a boy dressed up for playing at being a sailor; and so no doubt he regarded her. As it was, I could hardly bring myself to utter words to her; but now I dissembled. I followed his glance up to the towering masts with their ragged sails ceaselessly flapping in the wind. I said: 'You

must surely be working something like a miracle? Can it really go on?’

‘We’re in the trade routes,’ he said. No doubt he didn’t immediately reflect that so they had said to the crew, setting them out to sea with promises of landfall six miles distant, or of being soon sighted and picked up—when they had sent them out on the heaving night Atlantic in a leaking boat.

‘And if we’re picked up... Sarah,’ said Mary, carefully, ‘we are now just the three of us. We’ve made up a story between us, he and I; and if you will but keep silence, you may save his life.’

‘When we come ashore,’ he said to me, ‘she and I must part: If only to uphold our story, we must part. From then I shall be again in your keeping; and if you’re to save my soul, there may be a long lifetime to do it in. By condemning me now to almost immediate death—what chance will there be?’

I had to play my cards carefully; not seem just to buckle in easily. ‘You talk of your salvation as though you suffer from some sickness and must recover from that before you start a new way of life. Why not begin your repentance now?’

Mary said: ‘He does suffer from a sickness. We both suffer from a sickness. You’ve seen for yourself what it is.’

‘Yes, I have. And I don’t think you will either of you ever recover. So why does he wait for that?’

‘It’s a common sickness,’ she said. ‘We infect one another. Once we are parted—’

‘You’ll never be parted,’ I said. ‘You’re part of one another now, cloven together. You’re like—two demons, possessed: cloven together, one body, one mind, one soul—one soul of darkness; cloven together by the awfulness of

your common crimes. You'll never be parted.'

'You'd better listen first,' she said, 'to the story we've made up. You'll see that if we wish to survive we can never come together again.'

I stood there, swaying with the dipping and rolling of the ship, the wind whipping my hair across my face, whipping the shawl clutched about my thin shoulders, while with one hand I clung to the rail of the deck. He stood at the wheel, his powerful hands controlling the strong wooden spokes, glancing all the while at the binnacle just before him. We must stand fairly close to hear one another through the crying of the wind in the torn sails, the eternal creak and groan of rope against wood, the heavy splashing of the waves up against our sides. She came and stood next to me. She said: 'Sarah—listen now, carefully...'

'This is our story,' he said. 'And we must each tell it, detail for detail, the same. If you refuse to say actual untruths—well then, say nothing. That's all we ask of you—say nothing. We can give out that your illness began long before it did, that while all this occurred you were in a high fever, lying sick in your cabin; that we must haul you this way and that, you hardly conscious of what happened. You've been very ill; you can say with truth that you were ill. Describe your condition with all truth; only don't deny that it began sooner than it did. Now—Mary will instruct you...'

So she stood close to me. 'Sarah—we shall say that all went well with us. But that day—November the 24th it was—you already lying sick in your cabin, if that's the way you wish to tell it—we were set upon by a privateer from the Barbary coast—'

'A privateer?' I said. 'Do you mean by pirates?'

'Pirates from the north coast of Africa were common in

these waters,' my husband said. 'They've been very much put down but it's by no means impossible that a few may still be at work—'

'One gang was, at least,' said Mary. 'For they boarded us and there was terrible fighting.' She explained: 'While the yawl was yet afloat, we went down—he and I: thank God for the calm, so that we could leave the ship to herself and contrive these things! We rowed her round to the bows of the brig and there made two great scores, to show where the pirates had rammed us and so come aboard.'

'You think of everything,' I said sardonically.

'So we must, if we're to survive. Well, then, there was a terrible fight and at last we drove them off. But the crew had been terribly injured, some killed; and the others have since died and been buried at sea—'

'I was well enough to witness two burials at least,' I said.

'Oh, Sarah—for heaven's sake! And yet...' She said to my husband: 'If Sarah were to testify to this—to seeing Gilling buried, your prayers over him—'

'It'll be best for Sarah to have seen and known nothing,' he said. I see him now saying it, standing with his hands fighting the heavy wheel, his long dark hair blown back, his black beard blown back against his chin, his dark eyes fierce and determined.

'I came back to life, then, and found all the crew gone? No theft committed by the marauders—?'

'They were fought off, I tell you,' said Mary.

'—and only our Captain left conveniently unmarked, and his wife and his woman safe and sound?'

'I was armed with a pistol,' said my husband. 'The men had only wooden clubs, a cutlass and a hatchet—'

'We can show the mark of the thrown hatchet still in

the rail of the deck,' said Mary.

'And a blood-stained cutlass.' Stained with Richardson's blood.

She answered as though in perfect innocence: 'It's a pity that before we had thought of this solution, we'd cleaned the sword and put it away, and cleaned the hatchet.'

'Why would we have kept them blood-stained?' said my husband. 'It was natural enough, when we were still in possession of the ship and trying to sail her, that we should clean away the marks of the fight—we'd hardly remain with blood all over our decks

'If you change your minds and need some more,' I said, 'you can always spill some of mine.'

'Oh, Sarah!' said Mary again, as though worn out with protestation against my intransigence. 'Do you think we would harm you? Didn't I nurse you back to health? How easily I could have killed you in these past days. You were senseless, you wouldn't even have known.'

'He would have known,' I said. 'And that I think even he wouldn't forgive.'

'Could you have had a kinder nurse?'

'No,' I said, 'you were preparing the ground for this conversation. Do you think I'm a fool?' I *was* a fool; I knew that all too well, I'd been told it all my life. But not in everything.'

'Well—and so we are having this conversation. And asking you—asking you only to keep silent, to acquiesce in silence to all this careful story which is to save his life. The ship was attacked, the pirates fought off, our men were killed or so wounded that they died. They must fight hand to hand with knives or clubs; he alone had a gun and so could keep our attackers from himself. And he thought it his

duty to do that, if he could do it, since he had two helpless women to defend either from the pirates or from the elements once they'd gone. We two women, alone aboard—what would we have done?’

‘So he nobly survived. But—two women: that’s an awkward one! Captain Briggs is known to have sailed with his wife aboard—but not with his harlot also.’ And in a sudden new stab of fear, my hand left off clutching my shawl beneath my chin, and gripped hard on the rail. ‘Of course if when you come ashore there’s only one woman—’

For a moment Mary lost her careful calm. She said, ‘Don’t imagine that I haven’t thought of that, my dear! Then as his wife, he and I—’

‘My wife is known at her home and mine,’ said my husband, ‘and could be recognised by many in New York.’

‘And she recognised by *everyone* in New York!’ I said. ‘Or at least along the waterfronts.’ I added, savagely, ‘At least if she didn’t keep her clothes on.’

She kept her temper. She said with the laugh that once I had found so bewitching, ‘If you’d taken off your clothes for as many men as I have, my dear, you’d know that such imagined insults have no sting. Nothing matters now, either to him or to me—but that I take them off for *him*.’

‘But you say you’re to part?’

‘In Portugal, nobody knows her. We shall say that she’s the wife of one of the men—of Goodschaad, he wasn’t well known, he may or may not have been married; if it’s not in his papers, well we can say we were deceived.’

‘Are ordinary seamen allowed to bring their wives aboard?’

‘No, that’s well thought of,’ he said, as though we were all a little gang, working out our difficulties together. ‘I shall have to protest that he brought her there without my

knowledge.'

'Why not simply say they brought—her—aboard without your knowledge?'

'That might not be believed.'

'No one knows...' I broke off. I said: 'Now that all the men are dead and silenced, no one knows what there was between you two, before we sailed.'

'One man knows,' said Mary. 'Captain Morehouse of the *Dei Gratia* knows. He can't have left till many days after we did; we pressed forward our time, I know for certain that his cargo was hardly even beginning to load. He makes direct for Gibraltar. We shall put into a small Portuguese port where none of us is known, Ceuta if we can make it. There I will—say goodbye. I shall return I suppose, at last, to New York and there tell some story of a stolen voyage in a ship I shan't name. You and he...' She in her turn broke off, and her white teeth bit into her red lip; she turned her face away and stared out to sea—and for the first time I believed that she believed that all this must really come true. I suggested: 'To come together again in some foreign land, when all danger is past?'

'You forget,' said my husband, 'that you will meanwhile have had time to convert me back to my righteous ways.'

'You were a good man once,' I said, 'and may be so again.' I couldn't forbear to add: 'You seem less inclined now to tell me to mind my own business. And she strangely acquiescent for one who now owns you so securely body and soul.'

'We are like the two women before Solomon,' said Mary, 'you and I. You'd have him cut in two, so that you might save your share of him for God. I'll give him up if that will give him life.'

'Sarah,' said my husband, patiently, interrupting for the

second time as though we two were simply a couple of women squabbling over possession of a man. ‘The world of the waterfronts is far divided, but small enough: the world of sailing ships is a circumscribed world. If ever we two come together again, Mary and I, all that world will know of my guilt. We shall not meet again in this life—’

‘We shall meet in hell,’ said Mary to him. ‘And it will be heaven because you are there.’

He had been all his life a God-fearing man; he turned aside his head and his eyes half closed as though, for all his infamy, the thought of hell fires could still have terror for him. I said, thinking it clever to divert them from any intention of mine to save him by handing him over to justice, ‘Make your assignations with her in the next world where you will. As you’ve said, it’s really no business of mine. But have you thought what you’ll say if we’re overtaken by a ship from New York that knows you both? That knows who she is.’

‘Then we must admit to my identity, of course,’ said Mary, ‘and say simply that the crew smuggled me aboard, he knowing nothing of it. In that surely you can agree, give evidence? You know it to be true.’

‘But will *they* believe it to be true?’

‘Of course. No one knows except Morehouse, he swore he’d tell nobody. Who else would dream of Captain Benjamin Briggs agreeing to such an arrangement?—and he with a new wife of his own, and carrying her aboard. Then, we can borrow men from her crew, get the brig to the nearest port in Portugal, and in due course I’ll ship back to New York; and there tell the same story.’

‘And you and I, Sarah, shall be man and wife again—’

‘God forbid!’ I said.

He said patiently: ‘Shall at any rate live outwardly as

man and wife. In time, if your hatred for me is so great, you may make some excuse I suppose, to return to your family; suffering from sickness, for that or any reason unable to endure the life at sea—I can visit you there between voyages and keep up some pretence...’

I am a figurehead. I am a wooden thing, with the salt seas dashing up, soaking me, drowning me in the old hopelessness, the old helplessness, stupid, vague Sarah, inept and unaware, pushed this way and that by the forceful and capable; with no love to call my own. Torn from the endless small scratches and bruising of the childhood home, flung among forces too violent for any spirit to endure—and I am again to return to the nest of thorns, with the added stigma of the first and only great adventure failed. I who had looked to love, have found no one to love. I am a figurehead with a heart of wood...

I crept away from them and down to my cabin—to Richardson’s cabin, he who had been kind, who for a moment of dreaming had been like the Archangel Gabriel to me; who had said, ‘You are so sweet,’ before he died. I knelt at my bedside and before it was too late, I prayed—I prayed. ‘Let me not fall back into a dreaming girl. Thou who hast supported me so far in a new spirit and a new strength and a new understanding—put down Thy golden hand, hold me, guide me: let me not fall back into helplessness, into that dreaming girl with no mind and no heart and—dear God!—no soul, of her own. Let me not become once more a lifeless figurehead...’

All the next days, I wrestled with the spirit of that prayer: I fought for identity, I fought for courage, I fought for my own soul so that in the days to come I might fight for my husband’s soul. I had sworn to love him. If I could not love him with my heart, then it no less behoved me to

love him as a soul that must be given back to God. As such I have prayed, in this narrow place, for him ever since: before this crucifix.

They spoke to me no more of their plans. I think that, since I made no violent denial as I always had before, they believed that I acquiesced. But at any rate there was no time now for further conversation. He saw that bad weather was coming and that somehow, somehow, he must contrive less sail. Two of the sails had been blown right away by now, one was hanging loose. The great sail at the stern of the vessel, the stay sail, I think—he said by some means must be got down. In the rising wind, the ship tossing and pitching, the waves beginning already to dash up, spraying up over the decks, we worked, we toiled, the three of us, all differences forgotten: I doing the least of the work, of course, but darting to orders, dressed up myself, now, in seaman's clothes—what could one do in thick, fluttering skirts and petticoats? No question of climbing the rigging, lowering carefully, reefing, whatever real seamen might have done. In a haze of ignorance I pulled on a rope when I was told to, wound up, unwound, slackened, released, hauled up again... Until at last, with a huge, rattling, rustling, crashing thud, down she came and lay in great heaped folds sweeping down to the top of the main deckhouse, astern. The brig slackened in her headlong thrust through the water but still sped on, the spume thrusting up and over her bows, the waves now sweeping through the open rails and across the decks, pouring down through any orifice left uncovered. I fled to the cabins and closed and boarded up such windows as I could, but even as I worked a wave would break over the height of the sill to the companion-way and water come pouring down into the

saloon. I struggled to the galley, the waves washing over my feet as I ploughed my way along the deck, now climbing uphill, now thrown into a downwards running trot as she pitched and tossed. Down there, I secured all I could, packed food high that might come to harm with the water rising already to my ankles. Above decks, I know that they struggled, those two, with what strength and courage!—forcing obedience from a ship which, with her sails all askew, was now like a wilful horse that finds its reins broken and feels its head. All that evening we battled; but at last the wind dropped and by nightfall she was once more under such control as she would ever be. We changed from our sodden clothing, into something warm and dry; I had brought from the galley food and hot drinks. Exhausted we sat at the table and ate and drank. He had lashed the wheel but now he said, wearily, ‘I must get back to the poop deck again.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ she said.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘You must rest. At some time or other I shall be forced to get some sleep and then it’ll be your turn. You’ll be of no use unless you’re rested.’ Except that he gave no actual order, he might have been speaking to his chief mate; even in my condition of total exhaustion I had a flash of wry humour as I told myself that so, indeed, he was. ‘You too, Sarah,’ he said. ‘To your cabin! You look fit to drop.’

‘She’s done great work,’ said Mary.

‘You’ve both been magnificent. We might well have been lost. Now rest,’ he said and dragged himself up to his feet and staggered off up the companion. She called out: ‘I shall relieve you at four bells.’ Four bells, six bells, eight bells—I don’t know. The bell tells the passing of the watch; I never came to understand it, only that the constant clang of

clapper against iron had oppressed my nerves in the days when regular watches had been kept. She went up at any rate some time during the night, I suppose; no use my offering, I couldn't understand the binnacle, compass, whatever it was they must read and follow; nor indeed could I hang on with sufficient strength, to the great spokes of the wheel. But she... Well, yes—she was magnificent.

I slept heavily. By daylight the wind had lowered but it was very dark and heavily raining. I washed and dressed; Mary had returned from whatever watch she had kept and was washed and dressed also, though both of us still in loose wrappers over our drawers and bodices. She said: 'You'd better light the stove in the galley and get us some breakfast,' and at that moment my husband's voice cried out on a note of wild exultation, 'A ship!'

Faintly, faintly to be discerned in the distance—to me no more than a smudge, seen dimly through the darkness and rain. But my husband cried out, 'My glass! Fetch me my glass!' and I ran down to the cabin and came back with it. He put it to his eye and for a long time steadily watched the approaching vessel. Then he lowered the glass slowly. Now his hands shook and his face was that ashen grey. Gone was all the huge power and ruthlessness, all the half mad brutality that had brought us to this hour. He said: 'The ship is the *Dei Gratia*.'

The *Dei Gratia*. With Captain Morehouse aboard, the only man left in the world who knew that Mary Sellers had been my husband's woman, back in New York; the only man in the world who would cast doubt upon any story they had planned to tell.

CHAPTER XVII

COULD HE EVER IN fact have cast real doubt upon the story? —so that it be absolutely disbelieved and my husband suffer the consequence of crimes which surely could not have been proved in any court of law? At any rate, they made no attempt whatsoever to consider it; and indeed I think that in that moment my husband's mind positively and finally gave way—that hard, narrow, bigoted mind that had received its first disintegrating shock when he came to himself and found himself—the great, the feared, the respected Captain Benjamin Briggs—tumbling on the floor of a waterfront brothel with a waterfront whore in his arms. He looked down now into her face and I think that he saw Death there —she had been to him through these days of advancing madness his Death-in-Life, his Life-in-Death... ‘Her skin was white as leprosy’—but *her* skin was golden and warm; she had thicked his blood not with cold but with the warmth of her woman’s body, with the warmth of her golden arms circled about his neck, with the white heat of her perverted love. He cried out: ‘To the yawl! Lower the yawl!’ and rushed to where the boat hung in the stern of the ship. She followed him. ‘Get food!’ she screamed to me,—and water, and warm clothes! I was too much bemused to do more than stumble forward as I had before, and, as I had before, collect provisions and fill cans with fresh water and stagger back with them to where they wrestled with ropes and cleats, winches, whatever it may all be called—crazily lowering the heavy boat down to the water. It tilted this way and that and at last with a violent splash landed right side up. The rope ladder was not there, they spent no time

searching for it; he cut wildly at a lanyard and tying it to the rail, dropped it over the side. No time given for protest, I followed him down and she after me. The rope had been so tied that a flick would release it; there should be no sign that the boat had been boarded that way. Without a word they took each an oar and began with smooth strokes to pull away from the ship, as on a night that seemed an aeon of hells ago, she and I also had done. We could see dimly that the *Dei Gratia* slackened speed, changed course, was making for the abandoned brig; but by that time we were a speck in the heaving ocean, with the *Mary Celeste* between us and them. They spoke not a word, each with two hands to an oar steadily pulling further and further away.

How long before they rested?—hanging, exhausted, across their oars, he no less spent than she. She gasped out at last, ‘Dare we hoist sail?’

‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘Not yet. In a little while, we’ll row again; but by now I think we must at least be out of sight—unless they begin raking about with a glass. And even then... Thank God for the rain, it’s like a curtain! Still, I think that a sail might be unwise for a little while yet.’

‘And anyway, they’ll be too much taken aback by what they find?’ She still had the forethought to suggest, ‘But if they do see us—?’

‘We must tell the same story as before. But... We can say that after last night’s storm, we could no longer control the ship. We thought she was sinking—’

‘You say there’s three foot or more of water in the hold,’ said Mary. ‘And there’s water in the lazaretto, I know.’ The lazaretto was, I think, where the spare gear was kept stowed. She herself had hauled the top off and I suppose never got it back on again, or only partially.

‘The water won’t convince them,’ he said. ‘They’ll see

that I'd sounded the pumps. No one would believe that with all my experience, I'd think there was danger in a few feet of water here and there.'

'If it got among the barrels—?'

'It could do no harm. No danger to the ship, no reason for leaving her.'

'One of the barrels stove in,' said Mary. 'They might believe you'd been afraid of some—explosion?'

'We went into all that,' he said impatiently, 'when we made up the tale about the pirates. No man of my experience would be anxious about the cargo. All's well with it, I'd know too well how to manage it.'

'If they found the fuse,' I suggested, 'even unlit—'

'He went in and got it,' said Mary. 'Knowing it was harmless and given time, he could get to it. We were afraid of what people might think, if it were observed there, in the unloading.' She said wretchedly at last, 'Perhaps we'd have done better after all, to stay with the ship?'

He sat on the board that stretched across the beam of the yawl, forming a seat, his elbows on his spread knees, his head in his hands. 'I must have been mad,' he said.

A strange, strange confabulation, the three of us, huddling there. The rain poured down, streaming off our oilskins, plopping into the puddle of water already forming in the bottom, and yet we must welcome it as a veil to hide us from the sight of man. On the heaving water, the little boat tossed and rolled, idling with the cessation of their rowing. We were going—whither? We were going—why?—going how? For mile upon mile about us under the teeming rain, the silent green heaving of the dark sea with its white hands slap-slap-slapping against the frail sides of our cockle-shell craft, the white spume spraying as wave mounted upon wave and fell back again and away...

A cockle-shell she was, tossing alone on the vast green waters of the ocean; but heavy enough to handle, by a man and two women. She was perhaps eighteen foot long, seven or eight at her widest part, in the centre. She narrowed again towards the stern and then was squared off. There were four or five boards across her for rowing—the thwarts, are they called?—and a wide seat in the stern. Here the rudder hung outboard with a—what?—a stick, a handle, a steering yoke I vaguely recall, something like that, and surely I should remember for God knows I clung to it long enough in the terrible days to come. She was fitted with a mast which must be hauled upright, with a square sail, a spritsail, that I do remember. I had stowed the water cans and the food, wrapped in canvas and oilskin under the seat. Now I began to bail out the water, as once I had done before, scraping at the bottom of the boat, tipping the contents out into the sea. A time was to come when we should all think ourselves mad to have thrown away that water from the sweet, fresh rain.

He took up his oar again and she hers. ‘We must get as far away as we can. If they come aboard the brig and start using the glass—well, anyway, the further, the better. And so hope for some other vessel to pick us up and meanwhile think what best we can then say.’ To another man, some story might be, however doubtfully, credible: but to Morehouse, who already knew so much—coming upon the brig, hastily abandoned when his own ship must have been already in sight... Another ship finding us needn’t know that we had not gone earlier, before we ever saw that help was at hand. ‘I must have been mad,’ he kept muttering to himself as he rowed. ‘I must have been out of my mind.’ She lifted her hand a moment from the oar and laid it on one of his but he seemed not even to notice it. I, creeping about

the bottom of the boat with my scraping tin can, thought to myself that it was a long time since Benjamin Briggs had been anything but out of his mind.

The rain ceased, we struggled, we three together, to raise the mast and get under sail. He came aft and showed me how to control the rudder. To go this way, I must push on the stick in the opposite direction, to go that way, I must push it—like this... Back to front, a mirror image—under his irritable instruction, I grew frightened and confused; a little patience, a little confidence at the outset that I wouldn't be dull and stupid about it, and I daresay I should have understood well enough, and soon enough picked up the trick of it. But now! The boat ploughed this way and that, they both stood, balancing, over me, screaming at me furious instructions. No doubt it was an agony to know that even this simple task could not be left to me. I mastered it at last but by the end, we were all three worn out again, I with trembling uncertainty, they with frustration and contempt. I think that they were deeply afraid. They kept looking back to where men from the *Dei Gratia* must long ago have boarded our ship and found the strange condition of things there—the log not made up for the past ten days, as though she had been vacated then; all our possessions strewn about, the men's clothes still there and small intimate things, their pipes and tobacco, the slate with those last words of poor Richardson scrawled upon it, 'Fanny my dear wife...' Money lying about, my small pieces of jewelry, and Mary's; (would rough seamen recognise the difference between her dresses and mine and deduce that there had been more than one woman aboard?) My sewing-machine and the melodeon with music still propped up on it, though it was many a day since I had struggled with those hymn tunes there. That we had so very recently departed—no

sign; we had not yet breakfasted, I hadn't lit the galley stove nor yet the stove in the saloon where we might dry our wet things. Indeed, beneath the oilskins, Mary and I still wore only our underclothes, covered with loose wrappers so sudden had been his summons when he saw that smudge on the horizon that had proved to be the *Dei Gratia*; the decision to abandon ship. He had brought with him a barometer and a sextant, enough to enable him to navigate the yawl, I suppose; I wondered what they would make of those two being missing. But I saw when the rain stopped and he took off his oilskins, that his watch wasn't in its breast pocket; would they find it swinging, tick-tick-tick over the head of what once had been my bed? Would anybody note that it must have been recently wound? As the rain ceased, the wind freshened and now with the sail unfurled we scudded through the swell of the waves and it was all I could do to hold her as I had been instructed. They two left me to it and went up into the forepeak of the boat and there unfolded a tarpaulin to its dry side and flung themselves down, side by side, and there sat and earnestly talked, she now and again throwing an arm about him as though to comfort him. I think that, having brought us to this pass, he was very much afraid; but she was never afraid. While she could see and touch him, put her arms about him, run her fingers through that rough, dark hair of his—she would be afraid of nothing. If ever there was a woman possessed by passion for a man, it was Honey Mary, the waterside harlot, for Captain Benjamin Briggs. After a while, she pulled him to lie down and lay up close against him, shameless in her need to be in his arms. Whether they loved, slept, or only lay for a little while forgetting, in the comfort of each other's arms, I don't know. I curled up on the broad seat and fought with the steering yoke and stared

out to sea.

And so came about the last of our strange routines. At intervals one or other or both of them would come to the stern and take a turn at the rudder with me, or arrange the sharing out of the food and fresh water. Our course, within reason, was of little importance, as long as it should not head north and cut again across the path of the *Dei Gratia*. They discussed it anxiously. ‘Surely she’ll outstrip us within the next hour?’

‘Not if she decides to bring in the *Mary Celeste* for the salvage she’d fetch.’

‘Well, now one thinks of it, that’s sure enough,’ she said, laughing. ‘Davey Morehouse never would resist such a gamble as that!’

‘She’s perfectly sea-worthy; we knew that for ourselves, only you and I handling her. He’s only got to pump her dry, there’s a spare sail or two he can rig up; put two or three men aboard—’

‘Can he spare them?’

‘He carries the same crew as we did. If we two—with such help as she could give us—could manage the *Mary Celeste*, then he and three men can manage his ship and put three aboard burs.’

‘In that case, they’ll be far ahead of us in this wretched thing—’

‘They’ll be a day or two, making repairs; and he’ll hang back I suppose, and support the brig on her voyage. We must keep well away from them.’

‘As long as we stay within the trade routes,’ she said, ‘till some other ship finds us

So he plotted some course and between us I suppose kept the yawl to it. What speed we made, I have no idea. Allowing for the way made while we three handled the

ship, we were still six hundred miles from land.

The day passed and the night passed, and the day passed and another night. By day I sat in the stern in control of the rudder, now and then relieved by one or other of them. By night I rolled myself in rugs and a tarpaulin and huddled against the curving hull and slept strangely, full of dreams. How they spent their nights, I would hardly enquire; through the days *and* the nights, I know that they shared watches between them and long before I slept and long after, all too early, I awoke, I would hear rustlings and murmurings and cries in the darkness. And another day passed and another night; and, sparingly though we might have used it, the food that had seemed so much when I gathered it together was growing very low; and the water too. I cared so little for my life by then that they might have shared it out between them and let me simply fade into nothingness—if it had not been for the thirst. But in any event, they divided the ration always absolutely equally into three.

I think it was not bitterly cold; but the cold chilled one through and there was no means of getting warm. They two might lie together close and share their bodies' heat, but I, always too thin and now rapidly getting thinner, felt it through to my bones. We made no moan. She felt, I think, that the smallest outward admission of suffering would have seemed like a reproach to him for that wild decision that had brought us to this pass; and if she could endure and give no sign, then neither would I.

They teach us that hell will be a pit of fire, burning. I think it will be that waste of dull, grey-green water, ever restless, heaving, upward leaping, with its promise of quenched thirst while our mouths grew ever more parched, our tongues furred and dry: water, water everywhere,

slopping over into the boat, drenching our clothes with its salty spray, lying puddled where we might have slept in some small comfort; and we no longer with strength or caring to bale it out. *Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink.* The lines of the great old rhyme ran through my leaden head, it seemed to me that indeed ‘the very deep did rot, and slimey things did crawl with legs, upon the slimey sea.’ *Alone, alone, all, all alone, Alone on a wide, wide sea, And never a soul took pity on My soul in agony...*

But one took pity—crawled towards me, knelt there, took my hand, tried to explain through parched lips, cracked with the salt spray, that he would have refused food and water, given his life if it would have saved us; but what would we do, we two women alone, ignorant, helpless, strength gone...? I crouched there, uncaring. I was sick with the deep inner chill, the salt wind blowing off the sea, the ceaseless rocking of the boat. I said no word.

I know how his tongue felt huge in his mouth and dry, how every syllable was an effort of the will, forced out, half unintelligible from the burning throat. He mumbled: ‘We shall all die soon,’ and grasped at my hand again with his own hand grown to a thing of bones and stretched parchment, and looked up into my face and rattled out the words: ‘Pray for me.’

I lifted my heavy head, looked back into his eyes; but she came staggering across to us, dangerously shifting the balance of the boat; she couldn’t endure, I suppose, even *in extremis*, that he should show feeling for me. She had weathered the hardship better than either of us: her magnificence had lain in her health and vigour, in the lithe strength of that beautiful body, and she seemed to have drawn upon it but sparingly. The hollows in her cheeks served only to give a greater beauty to the bones beneath

the flesh, her eyes were huge and brilliant in their shadowed sockets; the honey of her skin had been burned to a golden brown by the salt spray, her hair tumbled about her head like a lion's mane. She clutched at his tattered sleeve and he hadn't the strength, I suppose, to resist her; but before he pitched and staggered away from me, he touched my hand again, and again rasped and rattled it out to me: 'Save—my soul!'

I could utter no word but I bent my weary head in reply.

How many days and nights, I shall never know. One day he lifted a hand, heavy as lead at the end of his fleshless arm and pointed. She whispered: 'A ship!'

How they together mustered strength to make signals, I don't know. I, with my smaller strength, perhaps with my lesser will, lay little more than half conscious on that broad seat in the stern which had been my kennel for so many, many hideous hours. But some signal was given: far, far off on the horizon, the ship was altering course, turning to approach us. Exhausted by this last one great effort, he fell into a sort of stupor, only gazing steadily ahead to where salvation approached at last.

The salvation of the body.

She left him there. Dragging herself along the bottom of the boat, she made her way to me. She caught at my skeleton hand as he had done. She got out two words. 'Don't —tell!'

He had prayed to me to save his soul. I stared ahead speechless, gazing out over the intolerable ever moving, moving, moving grey-green sea. She knelt at my feet, she made, feebly, the sign of the cross upon her breast; fumbled at her bosom, drew out the gold cross she wore about her neck—her cracked lips kissed it. She held it out to me, still

on its chain about her neck. She seemed to plead, wordlessly: 'Have mercy!'

For her sake, he had robbed me of his body and the heart within his body; for her sake he had robbed his Maker of his soul. He had murdered two men and sent them to God with all their sins upon them; with her, had sent to their deaths seven men in all. These sins must be expiated here on earth, lest they bring a terrible retribution in the world to come. I gave no sign.

I saw the desperation in her eyes. The dry lips moved but seemed able to make no more sound. She placed her thin, shaking hand against her breast with a gesture of repudiation, with the other hand pointed to where he lay huddled in his exhaustion in the prow of the boat. The motion said: 'Not for my sake. For his!'

But it was for his sake that I must do my duty. He had come to me, he had prayed to me to save him; it had never been my intention to do less. To save him from eternal damnation, he must pay an earthly price for his sins. For the first time I made some acknowledgement. I shook my head.

Her whole being seemed to lift, to grow strong again, her bright eyes to grow more brilliant, the sap to return to her veins with the huge force and courage of a final determination. She rose to her full height, stood balanced there with all the old, flaunting magnificence of strength and vitality: looked down at me for one brief moment and then swooped, caught me by the arms, jerked me to my feet and with one swift movement thrust me towards the gunwale of the boat.

Alive and alert, I should perhaps have been easier prey. But in her emaciated arms, my weight was the dead weight of my helplessness. I slumped in her hold and she had not strength to jerk me again to my feet and as she struggled to

raise me, he was upon us, lurching towards us down the length of the rocking yawl. And he had hauled her off me, thrown me back into my corner, was struggling with her as she tried to fling herself again upon me and with her tigress teeth and claws rip me into silence if no other way would serve. I staggered up, tottered towards where now they wrestled, he fighting for her subjugation, she to break free and attack me again—and feebly tried to drag her off him. She released her hold for a moment and with her free hand gave me a shove which, weak as it may have been, in my condition was enough to send me toppling back against the side of the boat. The release of my hampering weight flung them, still locked together, to the opposite side; the yawl rocked violently and, without so much as a scream or a cry, in a terrible silence they had vanished from my sight.

He could have saved himself perhaps; but her strength was spent, she clung like a dead weight about him. *Instead of the cross, The Albatross about his neck was hung...* They threshed in the water, sank beneath its churned surface, came up again with streaming hair and gaping mouths; sank again.

With one hand grasping the gunwale, I leaned far out and stretched my hand to him. For the second time, he came up again. She lay across his arm, her own hanging lax in the water. His eyes were closed, his mouth gaped open; he was near to death. My own scream was like the rattle of death indeed, as I leaned ever further over, dangerously tilting the boat, reaching out my hand to him.

He opened his eyes. He looked full at me, flung up his hand and for a dying moment held it high. The light glittered cold on the gold of Mary Sellers' cross.

When I knew consciousness again, they were gone and I clutched fast in my hand this cross that now hangs with the

worn black crucifix, at the end of my rosary.

With God in his hand, he died—doing penance for his sins. With God in my hand, I have lived—and done penance also for his sins. *God have mercy upon him... Lord have mercy upon him... Into Thy hands, oh Lord, I commend his spirit...*

They found me alone in the drifting yawl, with this cross in my hand, bearing her name. They brought me to this place and I was nursed back to life. They gave me her name and, since I carried a cross, what I suppose might have been her religion: in mine we had no room for golden idols. What did it matter?—under any form, one may worship the one, true and living God. I feigned ignorance of my whole past; there were wrecks enough at sea for there to be no suspicion that a woman bearing a name unconnected with the brig found abandoned many miles distant, could have anything to do with the mystery. The yawl, if she had any name painted upon her stern, still discernible, had at least none approximating to the name of the Mary Celeste; and as I have said, in this remote place, far, far from Gibraltar where enquiries were going forward, communications would be slow or exist not at all. As Mary Sellers, I allowed them to do what they would with me: took their veil, vowed their vows, adopted their way of life —what did it all matter?—all I needed was peace and a place to do penance for his sins.

The lecturer is talking some nonsense about insurance, about a meeting, a conversation at any rate, having taken place before ever they sailed from New York, between Captain Briggs of the Mary Celeste and Morehouse of the Dei Gratia; about a plot between them, the abandonment of the brig with her cargo in furtherance of a claim for insurance—some fraudulent trick that I don't understand. I say nothing, waiting for the novices to wheel me away to

the seclusion of my cell; watching my own gnarled hands play with the gold cross at the end of my rosary. Let him jabber on, poor fool! What does he know about it? My husband—lend himself to knavery of that sort! Captain Benjamin Briggs, I'll have you know, my dear sir—for all the sins of the flesh was in the depths of his soul a God-fearing man.

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